



JUNIPER LOA

Singapore is a land of many contrasts. In the 1920s, the period in which *Juniper Loa* is set, the life of this British colony, part exotic oriental island, part bustling international port, was a curious blending of East and West. Silok, who had come to seek his fortune here, had never felt truly comfortable in this hybrid society. Ensnared by the sophisticated cosmopolitan city, he found excitement with the sensuous and unconventional Eurasian girl, Hamsun. But deep within himself he was still a mountain boy with strong ties in the China of his childhood. He often thought of the lovely Juniper Loa and her son, who he knew was also his child. He wondered if Juniper was happy with the life she had chosen for herself when she remained in China to look after her struggling family; and he remembered her shining face, her long hair blowing in the breeze, and the blissful days they had spent together.

BOOKS BY

LIN YUTANG

My Country and My People

The Importance of Living

Moment in Peking

With Love and Irony

A Leaf in the Storm

Between Tears and Laughter

The Vigil of a Nation

The Gay Genius

Chinatown Family

On the Wisdom of America

The Widow Chuan

Famous Chinese Short Stories

Vermilion Gate

Unexpected Island

Lady Wu

The Secret Name

From Pagan to Christian

The Importance of Understanding

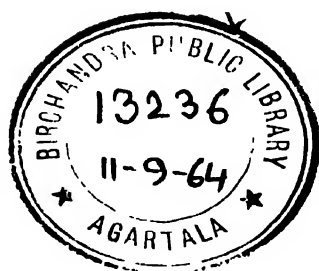
The Red Peony

The Pleasures of a Nonconformist

Juniper Loa

JUNIPER LOA

LIN YUTANG



HEINEMANN : LONDON

William Heinemann Ltd
LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO
CAPE TOWN AUCKLAND

First published in Great Britain 1914

Manufactured in Great Britain by Bookprint Limited
Crawley and Kingswood

We seem to linger in manhood to
tell the dreams of childhood,
and they vanish out of memory
ere we learn the language.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

**The story is fiction. Any resemblance between
the characters and any living or dead persons
is purely coincidental.**

CHAPTER 1

IN THE EARLY HOURS presaging the dawn Silok's large frame sprawled upon the white sheet of his bed, while his mind wandered. He was caged in a white fine-mesh mosquito net which hung down from a circular bamboo frame like a festoon. In the hot Singapore night he slept all but naked, with only his shorts on. For cover, he had a hard pillow, some four feet long and a foot in diameter, sometimes called a Dutch wife, used to protect the belly from catching cold or to rest one's legs on. It did not cling to the body as even a light sheet would.

He had passed a restless night. Lazily and by habit, he reached for a cigarette. Without opening his eyes fully, he looked across the verandah outside his window, where a reed mat had been left half rolled up, and saw the street lights still shining and, beyond, the pearl-gray sea of the Singapore harbor. There was not the slightest movement of sea or clouds. The familiar high-pitched calls of the sea

gulls which usually began at about five had not started yet.

He pulled the well-tucked mosquito net from under the mattress, twisted it around, and threw it over the headboard, the circular frame above swinging with it. The air was palpably cool at this moment, although in a few hours' time the tropical sun would beat down and the sea would glare and dazzle like a sheet of molten silver or hot glass.

He had a splitting headache and a bitter taste in his mouth . . . from last night's dinner, of course. In his pre-dawn half-awake state of mind everything seemed a little insubstantial, unreal . . . even the throbs in his head, which he knew would pass away. Even Hamsun's kiss, which had the quality of some raw, exotic, strong liquor. The walls which enclosed him, his desk, the half-rolled reed screen, and the sea itself all had the quality of apparitions, objects that we regard in our wide-awake moments as the creatures and shapes of a dream.

He had a feeling that he did not belong to this adult life in Singapore in which he found himself. It was not that he was tired, but rather that he had so much energy that part of it, the emotional part of himself, flowed over into revelry. That was why his uncle, in whose house he was living, called him restless.

He became conscious of the familiar exquisite scent of *hamsiao* (half-a-smile), the flower of his home town, Changchow. Like some good perfumes, it took on the quality of its surroundings. One might not smell it for a half-hour, and all of a sudden it would be there again, stealing upon one unawares. It was an oval-shaped flower ivory in color, now browned around the edges, which Juniper had sent him a fortnight ago.

Since his return home after his graduation from the University of Malaya two years before, Juniper had been sending him flowers from his own town—a rambler rose in spring, a half-a-smile in summer, or an eagle's claw (a species of fine-scented, small pale green orchid with the same elusive,⁹ distinctive fragrance), lots and lots of *chhiulan* beads (which could be used to scent tea) in autumn, and a gorgeous camellia or exquisite petals of *lamei* (winter plums) in winter—scents, elusive, pervasive, intangible, and indefinable, half reminding one of a flower, and half of a woman's smile.

By imperceptible degrees the sky was brightening from somber gray to aquamarine to a pale jade-green, while the distant cloud masses caught the first faint blush of the early dawn. It was careless of the maid to have forgotten to let down the verandah screen last night; but last night there was the party for Mrs. Oe, and the maid might have gone out of her mind at the sight of her big diamonds.

The images floated across his mind—Mrs. Oe's loud, brassy voice, the hot breath of Hamsun upon his breast, and, of a different order, more distant but persistent, Juniper's smile—Juniper, who loved him wholeheartedly and gave him everything and expected nothing from him in return.

Superimposed on this backdrop of clouds and sea was another picture in Silok's mind, as he lay pillowed against the headboard, the lashes of his eyes half drawn down. Above the clouds on the horizon, he saw the familiar faint blue outline of the Southern Hills of his village and, lower down, the highland landscape of undulating hills and cool deep forests and Juniper's cottage. He fancied he could

almost hear her voice ringing in the lichee grove. He rather welcomed these moments of early dawn, when his mind could so easily pass from the real to the unreal.

Last night's party for Mrs. Oe, with her diamond pendant and her gold teeth studded with fine commercial diamonds, became terribly unreal. Even Hamsun's hot kiss and tousled hair falling upon her shoulders became slightly dreamlike.

He remembered that it was Saturday. He did not have to go to the office. He carefully crushed out his cigarette stub in an ash tray and slid down to doze off again.

When he next woke up, it must have been long past nine. The glare of the sea, catching the morning sun full on the east side of Singapore Bay, blurred his vision. Somewhere a steamer blowing low-pitched horns was coming into the harbor. He went out to let the verandah screen down.

At the other end of the verandah, some thirty feet away, he saw Juana, her supple young figure showing through her transparent sarong. Juana was his uncle's concubine. She was Chinese too, from Soochow, but she fancied the sarong and often wore it at home because it was light and airy. Her hair was not yet combed and fell easily down her back while a jet-black side curl was set across her cheek. Seeing him, she came over, trailing along in her golden slippers.

"Morning. Had a good sleep?"

"Morning."

She smiled easily. "Want an aspirin?"

Without waiting for his answer, she disappeared and then returned, entering his room through a French win-

dow. He hastily threw a pajama jacket on, leaving it unbuttoned.

She held the aspirin in her slender white hand tipped with painted nails, and looked him over from head to foot. Silok was used to this; women were always indulgent toward him. How she had anticipated his needing an aspirin!

Juana was young, under thirty. She had incredibly fine skin and a fair complexion and rather full, luscious lips. Before noon, she would have touched up her face and drawn a blacker eyebrow, and a touch of lipstick would have brightened up the whole face, making her mouth seem smaller, daintier. But even now, her cheeks had a healthy glow. She had sensuous eyes and lips, and her voice was low.

It was true that there was nothing going on between them, but Silok was the kind of young man a girl would be glad to do things for. She and Silok were far too intelligent, however, to get involved with each other, although anybody could see that she could manipulate his uncle with her eyes closed. Just now, she seemed to have something on her mind.

Silok asked, "Where is Uncle?"

"Gone to his office."

"Oh, yes, of course." His uncle was an early riser.

It was one of those Saturday mornings, with him at home, his uncle in his office and not expected for lunch, and his aunt, who suffered from stomach ulcer, still in bed. Neither the aunt nor Juana had any children, and there were only Ah-hua, a Cantonese maid, and some servants around the house.

Pressing her hips against the edge of his desk, Juana

said with a pleasant singsong in her voice, "It was rude of you last night to get up from dinner like that."

"I know it."

"Mrs. Oe's big eyes followed you as you left the room."

"They would."

"Uncle was quite put out, too."

Silok said he was sorry.

Juana sauntered around the room, swaying her hips. For a moment she stopped before a faded and yellowed photograph of the Egret's Nest—which was the name of Juniper's cottage—framed in varnished walnut, hanging on the wall. Slowly she turned and, fixing a deep look on him, said, "It is difficult for me to say anything. But it is just as well to let them know if you do not like Alice." Alice was Mrs. Oe's daughter.

Silok raised his brows, then his face softened a little as he said, "I am glad you think so."

"Of course, many mothers of marriageable daughters would have an eye on you. University of Malaya graduate. Working with an English law firm, and" —her voice softened— "many a girl would fall for you. You know that. You are very attractive to girls, you know that . . . And your uncle—you know very well why he is very anxious about this match."

She stopped and, looking straight at him, said, "I am on *your* side." She stressed the word "your."

He pressed his hand to his head, and squeezed it.

"What's the matter?" There was keen concern in her voice.

"Nothing. Just the headache . . . Do you understand?"

"Of course I do." She picked up a cigarette from the

gold filigree box, lighted it, and took a long puff. "You don't want to sell yourself even for your uncle."

At this moment, her eyes deepened. Silok could see only the black of her eyes. She was not just giving friendly, detached advice.

Her mind traveled very fast and she said abruptly, "You went out to see Hamsun?"

"Yes."

"I thought so."

"I am not keeping it a secret from you."

He had not. He had already told her about meeting Hamsun, but so far his uncle knew nothing about it. Hamsun was a Eurasian girl of twenty-two whom he had met one late afternoon on the beach. Not far from their house, which was on East Coast Road, there was an evening bazaar. Many people, young and old, went there to spend the cool evenings. Cold drinks and agar-agar jelly and hot snacks and all kinds of noodles and vermicelli were sold at open-air tables there. Below was the beach, and further on were deserted roads overgrown with grass, where many young lovers met and lay down on those intoxicating tropical nights.

This was Singapore: contrast of intense, suffocating heat and cool nights, like *satay*, the Malayan version of shish-kebab, dipped in a very hot sauce. The seller squatted on the floor. The buyer sat on a low stool or also squatted, eating the hot *satay* with one hand and a piece of cucumber in the other. When the *satay* got too hot and one's tongue burned, one bit on the cucumber. When the tongue had cooled off, one bit on the hot *satay* again.

Was Singapore love the same?

"Your uncle has his reasons, good business reasons, to desire this match. But I think a man must marry the girl he loves. Alice is a very nice, quiet girl . . . She is in love with you, I know . . . All the same, if you do not love her, why marry her?"

"I think you are the only one who talks sense in this house," Silok commented wryly.

Silok's uncle, Tan Sengtai, had left his home town in mainland China and come abroad as a day laborer. He had worked his way up by thrift and intelligence. He got his first break during the First World War, when he made a modest fortune in rubber. Furthermore, being very shrewd, he converted all his savings into U.S. dollars at the time when a U.S. dollar was worth only one dollar Mex, at times even slightly below. He knew the value of the U.S. dollar would go up. He now had his rubber plantations in Johore, across the Causeway from Singapore, and he had his two-room office near the Esplanade, and a nice villa on East Coast Road, where many fashionable villas stood.

The Oes were a different story. They were one of the oldest and richest families in Singapore. They owned huge sugar plantations in Soerabaja, tin mines in Malaya, and whole streets in Kuala Lumpur. Tan Sengtai was happy to have come up so far in Singapore society, and being a stubborn man—you could see it in his large set jaws and his pudgy hands—nothing would please him better than being related to the Oes. It would put a final stamp upon his success and social status. Mrs. Oe had, in order to show Silok what she could do for him, gone so far as to make Palmer and Elliston the Oes' corporation lawyer, to look after their

estate interests. Palmer and Elliston, the firm where Silok was working, were grateful for the handsome annual retainer, and Silok rose in importance in the eyes of his employers.

Alice was a tall, slender girl, neither pretty nor unbearably homely. The only thing about her that might strike one as unusual was her rather too thick eyebrows. She was a simple high-school graduate, with a hungry look on her face. That came of living under a domineering mother, the fat, paunchy Mrs. Oe, and a philandering father mostly absent from home. It was fair to say that with the Oe fortunes many an uglier daughter would have had no difficulty in finding a young son of some other rich family, perhaps with a house in Singapore, another country villa in Penang, and a black Buick or a red sports car. But Alice had set her heart on Silok. His half-sad, meditative eyes had captivated her. He seemed to have something extra, that extra *esprit* and *élan* which made him fascinating. Silok had always been courteous and friendly to her but never more than that. At other times he had been abrupt and brusque, and she liked that too.

Alice talked with a slight lisp and had gone to the best institution to correct it, but she still lisped her *d*'s and *t*'s. Her tongue was probably too short. She would pronounce *into* with a hazy sound like *intho*. Still, it was nothing important.

Last night's party was given by the uncle in return for two dinners Mrs. Oe had given them. It was a family dinner, without other guests. Alice was there, looking her best with a new hair-do and a tight-fitting *cheongsam* and appearing very sweet and lively, seated next to Silok. Mrs. Oe

was in the seat of honor and the uncle, aunt, and Juana, being the hosts, sat further down. But no matter where she sat, Mrs. Oe's large, direct eyes, fat, firm cheeks, and double chin, and her loud talk and laughter would dominate any table. When she talked, everybody had to listen, and nobody could get in a word even if he wanted to. Even the uncle said not more than five words, and Alice, seated near her, looked like a mouse.

Mrs. Oe was self-assured. She understood everything in life except one thing: that anybody in love with her daughter would be scared away by the mother-in-law. She also made the mistake of thinking that diamonds on a girl would be a sure way of earning a young man's affection.

Juana could talk twice as fast as Mrs. Oe if she had wanted to, and with more sense. But she merely held her tongue and listened and observed.

She had conceived a hearty dislike for this rich lady. She had been snubbed twice when she was left out at the dinners given by Mrs. Oe for the uncle and aunt. This evening Juana was determined to make an impression. She was acting as the hostess, for the aunt was a retiring, timid lady, very well behaved and a stickler for the old rules of propriety, a Buddhist and vegetarian who would rather leave the hustle and bustle of social activities to the younger woman.

A third time Juana was snubbed when Mrs. Oe came in. When she greeted the honored guest in the most gracious way she knew, the latter hardly gave her a nod but asked where Auntie Tan was. The guest did not speak one more word to her.



When Silok came down, he encountered the strange sight of Juana whispering a few words with Alice, while the old lady's face was bent over her double chin, eyes half closed, looking thoroughly bored.

There was no rule in Chinese society that a concubine should be snubbed because she was a concubine. Quite the contrary, as a rule. Juana was pleased that the dinner had ended up the way it did.

It was obvious that the elders of the two families had hoped that tonight's meeting would make it possible for them to broach the subject of an engagement. At one point, when Silok stood up to put tea in Alice's cup, all eyes were on them.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Oe had taken the wrong tack. She began by saying how stupid and useless her husband was, how he ran around with women, in a way that made Alice blush and the others embarrassed. The old roué (*laopu-shiu*), she called him. Juana kept her eyes on the diamond brooch Alice was wearing and more especially on the huge baguette diamond on Mrs. Oe's necklace, which sparkled every time she shifted her body in the chair. Moreover, the wearer was conscious of it. She also committed the indecency of dipping her cigarette stub in a bowl of chicken soup and sharks' fins and leaving it there. Even though she was terribly rich, well . . .

The rest of the talk—it was not a conversation—was about her various estates.

"I can't keep track of them all. Eng-hi does not know a bloody bit and cares less. What I need is a son-in-law who can keep track of all the business, the rents, the insurance, the stocks, the dividends, and all the rest of it. Why, I told

Alice that at her wedding she can have her choice of a Rolls-Royce or a Cadillac, in any color she wants—black, red, maroon, gold-trimmed if she wants . . .”

At this point, Silok abruptly rose and unceremoniously walked out of the room, stopping in time to turn around and say, “Mrs. Oe, I am sorry I have another engagement. If you want to take the account away from Palmer and Elliston, you can.”

The uncle was stupefied, and more so Mrs. Oe, who could not understand what had happened.

“What have I said?”

Alice broke up the dinner by rising first. She had followed Silok’s movement with a prayerful, soulful, hungry look, and kept silent. Then she begged to be excused, went off to a sofa, and began to sob, dabbing her eyes silently with a balled-up handkerchief.

Mrs. Oe kept on repeating, “What have I done? What have I done?”

“Mama, you did it! You did it!” Alice shouted from the sofa. How she must have hated her mama!

Juana was exultant but kept quiet.

When the guests left, the uncle was furious. His voice was raspy as he commented on his nephew’s bad behavior. He bit on his cigar, slapped his hands noisily, futilely, and repeatedly on the armrest, and expectorated a great deal. Finally he went upstairs. It was Juana’s job to humor him, and she followed him up.

Juana was now saying to Silok, “Your uncle thinks you should apologize to Mrs. Oe.”

“Why should I?”

"Your uncle thinks you should. He wants me to speak to you about it."

"You said yourself a moment ago that if I am not thinking of marrying Alice, it is just as well to let them know."

"I am merely saying that if you are willing to call on Mrs. Oe and say something, you can. I promised Uncle I would speak to you."

"What do you think?" Silok always respected Juana's opinion.

"It depends on yourself. It will be unpleasant anyway if you have no intention of marrying into the Oe family . . . Your uncle would feel better if you would, and it costs nothing to say you are sorry. But sooner or later . . . it must be made clear. In the end, it will break Alice's heart. It cannot be helped . . . I still smell that wonderful fragrance of *hamsiao*—what do you call her? . . . Juniper?—Juniper sent you. One day you must tell me about her."

"Why?"

"I want to know."

"Because?"

"Because I am a woman."

She looked at him and he looked at her, and he said, "One day I will. We grew up together. I missed my chance and she is now married."

"Against your wish, I know. And against her wish?"

"You might call it that. Force of circumstances. Nobody's fault really."

"But she still sends you flowers. She apparently cannot write."

"No, she can't. Flowers say things, wordless things, that letters cannot, don't you think?"

"Well, I'll leave you. I am going out for a hair wash and must ring for the car. If you want to go to town, come along."

"No, thank you."

"I will tell Ah-hua to bring up your breakfast, unless you want to go down."

Juana left with a look that expressed her deep interest and excited curiosity.

While Silok was having his breakfast, he scanned the morning paper. A revolution was going on in China. It was 1927. The forces of the Nationalist Revolution had started from Kwangtung and quickly pushed on through Kiangsi. From all accounts, this seemed like the real thing, not one of those interminable civil wars between the war lords since the founding of the Chinese Republic fifteen years ago. The Nationalist Revolution was on, the aim to wipe out the war lords and reunify the country under the Kuomintang. It had a clear, well-organized program of reconstruction and had all thinking, intelligent Chinese behind it. The headline said: "*Shanghai Has Fallen.*" The Northern Expedition of the Nationalist forces was on the move. Young China had thrown its heart into the job. Silok got quite excited about it. The picture changed every month. He wondered whether the Expedition had bypassed his province of Fukien, and what would happen to his mother, his sister, and Juniper.

CHAPTER 2

SILOK FELT TERRIBLY BORED and lonely, not knowing what to do with himself today. He would be seeing Hamsun again, but that would not be until the evening. When they had met, several months before, Hamsun had told him that she was working in a milk bar on Orchard Road. She would not be off duty until eight.

Silok strolled to the broad verandah in a vest and well-starched and ironed pants. He seldom wore slippers, as everyone else did at home. This was a habit, indicative of the discipline he had received from his father, now deceased. Even at home, his hair was always well combed, except for a lock which constantly kept falling over his forehead.

His strong and unique family ties, ties which he had left in order to come to Singapore to study, and now to work as a young lawyer, probably accounted for his aloofness, and even his shyness, and the distant look in his eyes. His sensi-

tive eyes, coupled with a sad, meditative look and his general quietness, made a good impression on his English employers.

Juana had just said a moment ago: University of Malaya graduate—a young lawyer working in a British firm. A bachelor good enough to be a candidate for one of the Oe daughters. What irony, he thought!

He had left his home at the age of nineteen, when his father was still living, and come to study medicine. Then he had changed his mind and taken up law, because he was nauseated by the sight of human entrails, whether real or in colored pictures in anatomy books, and he preferred the order and logical precision of a legal training.

It was true that while at college, his greatest aim was to graduate with honors in law. Now that he had an LL.B., the glamour of a diploma had faded a little.

His father had been a poor schoolteacher. Partly through scholarship and partly with his uncle's help, Silok had pulled through college. The severe training he had had at home—frugality, self-discipline, attention to manners, an idealistic worship of books and learning—had made him aloof and retiring as a student.

He had not looked at girls during his college years, and the girl students thought him a strange fellow, because physically he had sharp features and a well-formed chin, and was a good tennis player. His aloofness and his general seriousness made him all the more attractive to them, but he seemed bent only on retaining his annual scholarship, worth five hundred Singapore dollars, which, in addition to his uncle's help, enabled him to go through college.

Now he was earning the equivalent of two hundred dol-

lars a month in Singapore money, and was sending money home every month to his mother, besides insisting on gradually paying back what his uncle had given to support him through college—which offended the latter terribly.

As if his uncle needed the paltry couple of thousand Singapore dollars! As if he was not his own nephew! It was like denying the uncle-nephew relationship and, besides, the uncle, having no son, was thinking very much of having him succeed him in the business and sharing it.

Silok had not made the adjustment to the easier way of life of the social set of his uncle. Born a mountain boy, always a mountain boy, he thought of himself. He envied the easy laughter and noisy hand-slapping and free confident ways that some of the city boys had with girls. These boys were sons of rich men, some of them his friends, but he just could not be like them.

He had known only women like his mother, his wonderful sister Bekum, and Juniper. Theirs was a unique family, poor but idealistic and happy, in which only the things of the mind counted. He had left those warm ties and come to Singapore to study because his father and uncle had encouraged it and he himself had wanted it.

In losing Juniper, he had lost all. That accounted for his overseriousness of countenance, his pensive, distant look, and his quietness, which made him attractive to his English employers and to the young girls.

And now, all of a sudden, because he was really lonely, he had fallen madly in love with the Eurasian girl who answered to his feminine ideal. At twenty-five, he had the mind of a man of thirty, and he was craving something he had lost.

He rang up his friend, Weysen, a former classmate at the University who was now running a social column in the *Nanyang Gazette*, one of the big morning papers. He would meet him at five in the afternoon.

Then he suddenly remembered that he had promised to see his aunt, Siu-eng, some weekend when she would be free, and he had not called on her for a month. Aunt Siu-eng was his father's youngest sister. She was a teacher of Chinese and painting in one of the government schools, very young-looking and unmarried. She was so like his father in her love of books and literature and art and all that was fine and beautiful and poetic. She wrote some poems too. Like her brother, Silok's father, she was capable of getting excited over some great romantic hero of history, or over a charming landscape, and also she could maintain a certain aloofness and detachment from the worldly interests which kept others busy. Silok thought it good and natural that she never wanted to get married, for she would be miserable if she should marry an uncultured rubber baron of Singapore. She could be hurt so easily.

Silok felt closest to her, for she had known him from childhood and they understood each other. In her company, he could feel again the sort of home he had come from. He thought of her as a water lily which grew out of the mud of Singapore, entirely untouched by it.

He rang up and said he would like to see her at her school, which was near Fort Channing. From there he could easily cross over and meet his friend Weysen on Hill Street.

Her room was like her own personality. Against a window was her neat spotless desk, on which were neatly ar-

ranged an inkstone, a pot of writing brushes, an exquisite little shallow jade water container in lotus-leaf design, and a white copper paperweight. The pillows and sheets on her bed were neatly folded. On the wall hung a Ming landscape, a copy of an ancient Tang painting. At one corner stood a dressing table with a few toilet articles. The effect was that of *kungling*—sparse and airy, nothing too much and everything in its place, with plenty of room to move about even in such a small space. Near the window hung a cage containing a pair of parakeets, and a miniature landscape of moss and rocks and pebbles and putty, in a pale beige porcelain tray, sat on the window sill. A soft green light filtering in through the window gave the room a cool atmosphere.

What a travesty it would be for a vulgar or stentorian man to live with her and throw things about in such quiet orderly surroundings, where nothing excited one except the things of the mind!

Again Silok thought, She should never marry.

One might have thought her puritanical, or unresponsive to Silok's troubles. Yet he knew that she was very human and had always understood him.

Silok told her with great gusto of the preceding night's dinner. She was greatly amused.

"Silok, you are a chip off the old block. Your father and your uncle never understood each other. How did Uncle feel?"

"He was furious. He asked me, through Juana, to apologize. Do you think I should?"

"Not unless you intend to be the son-in-law of Mrs. Oe."

Her spirited answer pleased the young man.

Silok's father had been the oldest, the uncle was number two and was called Jichék, and Siu-eng, the youngest, was addressed as Sarkor (third auntie).

"Sarkor, why didn't you come last night? Jichék invited you. He wanted you to be present."

"He did not tell me what the dinner was for. He just said that the Oes would be there. His voice sounded excited. I didn't think there was any particular point in my meeting Mrs. Oe."

She fixed a look on her nephew and added, "Why haven't you come to see me more often? How are you getting on these days?"

"As usual. I think they like me at the office."

"I don't mean that."

"What do you mean then?"

"Last night's dinner makes me think of your personal problems . . . You look so sad."

"Do I?"

"Not really sad. Preoccupied."

"I always look that way."

"Not really sad, and not happy either. I can sense it. The other day your uncle spoke to me. He thinks it is time that you got married and asked me what was holding you up. Have you a girl friend?"

Silok was silent.

"Still thinking of Juniper?"

"Maybe. She sent me a *hamsiao* about a fortnight ago."

"Yes, I know. Bekum told me that she was sending you flowers of the season. Most extraordinary girl, that Juniper."

Silok's eyes shone. He shook his head and merely uttered

a single word: "Juniper!" He added, "Is she happy? How did she look when you last saw her?" Siu-eng had been back in Amoy during the winter vacation.

"You know her. She is too busy with the day's work to be thinking of being happy or unhappy. On the go all the time, with that wistful smile of hers. I believe she is going to learn to read and write. I heard something about her wanting to learn so she could keep ahead of her boy, Bong-ah, in order to help him with his lessons."

Silok raised his eye, looking directly at her, and paused for a second. "You know, I believe?"

"Yes, I know. I learned from Bekum."

Bong-ah was Silok's child with Juniper. Because of him, she had had to arrange a hasty marriage with a peasant, Kamchia, now her husband.

Silok was silent for a moment. Then he said, "You know . . . it just happened . . . We loved each other. Bekum knows and my mother knows. As far as I know, though, Juniper's mother does not know."

"Is that why you missed marrying her?"

"It was my last vacation from school. I was coming abroad. When she found she was expecting, she had to arrange to be married quickly. Kamchia was working on their farm. I didn't know till months later. Her grandfather was going blind and her family depended upon her, and she couldn't, or she wouldn't, think of coming abroad with me . . ."

Tactfully changing the topic, Siu-eng said, "Last time I saw them, her grandfather was totally blind. I never saw a granddaughter taking such loving care of her grandfather. She adores him."

"I know," Silok said meditatively. "You see, people could not understand. At the time I could not understand, either, why she could not leave her family behind and come with me. She was thinking of her family all the time. Her grandpa needed her every day, every hour . . ."

Rather inconsequentially, he added, "I can never forget the way she used to put a peeled lichee in her mouth and, without the help of a finger, would manipulate it with her protruding lips and spit out a clean tone faster than any of us boys could. She could spit out three clean stones in the time it took us to spit out one. And she could hit a target five feet away. She had such mobile lips. And we used to squat on the ground and flip the lichee stones like marbles. You ought to have seen the triumph on her face when her stone would hit a 'fortress.' "

"Yes. I remember you children used to play together in that lichee grove. You and she always went off together, catching butterflies or crayfish in the ravine below. Your brother Sikeng used to hang around the grownups."

They were in a happy reminiscent mood. Silok's words flowed.

"She played the host when we boys were up at Egret's Nest. She used to drag me around. After eating a lot of lichee, she would pull us into the kitchen, take a spoonful of soy sauce, and ask us each to take a sip, saying it was good for us after eating the fruit."

"What do you mean by *us*?"

"Sikeng and Kamchia and I, and some other boys from the same school. She was generous to a fault. Once I asked her how she kept her teeth so white, for I know she used no toothbrush, and she said she used to wet her finger, dip it in

rock salt, and brush her teeth with it. The greatest fun was when we climbed the lichee tree and shook the branches after the picking was over. The grownups used to go up, clip the branches, and throw them down, and we children had to catch them before they hit the ground. You remember? After the picking was over, there were always odd ones left on the trees, and some inaccessible ones on the top branches. We used to shake the branches as hard as we could. Juniper used to say the trees liked it. The more we shook and teased them, the better they grew the next year. She said the trees are like human beings. After a big year, comes a small year. They want a little rest, too."

"I saw you two grow up," said Aunt Siu-eng. "I remember one summer afternoon. I don't know whether you remember it or not. I was up there with your mother and her mother sitting on stools under the lichee grove. It was beautiful and cool up there. Hawks were wheeling in the air against the setting sun. On the right was the Egret's Nest. You two had gone down the western slope. After a while, we saw your heads bobbing up and down. You two were coming back hand in hand up the slope again. Shafts of gold shot over the layer upon layer of hills in the distance. I saw her raise a hand and flip a tear from your eyes. She asked you, 'Why are you crying?' and you said, 'It is so beautiful,' and she said, 'Why, you cry for that?' and you said, 'Yes.' Perhaps you don't remember."

"I do."

"Well, your mother and her mother were saying what a perfect match you two would be for each other. I think Juniper's mother suggested it first, and your mother quickly agreed."

"Is she happy with Kamchia? Last time when I was home she said she was."

"She isn't the kind to moon and mope about the past. She is happy. Kamchia is good and honest. Now she has another baby—must be one year old now . . . I must tell you. Last time when she came to Changchow, she had made herself a long gown." The *cheongsam* was just coming into fashion then. "She looked stunning in it. She was transformed. You have no idea!"

"She wouldn't wear it back home."

"Of course not, not for farm work. But every woman has her vanities. When she came to Changchow, she bought a supply of face powder, and fiber flowers."

Changchow was famous for these things.

"No! Fiber flowers! She used to put a red rose, or a *chhitlihiong* in her hair. You remember the stream along the road leading up to her home? We played a game as children. There were a lot of butterflies and dragonflies on the banks. She would stick a flower in her hair and hide herself among the bushes until a butterfly would alight on her head. She would then slowly rise and walk away. The game was to see how far she could go without scaring away the butterfly. The orange-and-blacks, the monarch, are easy, but the big gorgeous bluish-green swallowtails are very sensitive and alert. They would fly away at once. The dragonflies are easy. We used to catch them on a sprig of heather with its tiny purple flowers . . ."

Siu-eng smiled. Her look embarrassed Silok, who at this moment still looked very much like a boy playing upon the bank. Silok stopped short.

"What are you smiling at?" he demanded.

"You men are incurably romantic. I suppose you think of her as a girl with a butterfly resting on her head. As a matter of fact, I often saw chaff and bits of straw in her hair. Mud on her feet."

Silok opened up completely and said, "I adore the mud on her feet," and laughed. "You think me silly, don't you? There isn't a girl in the whole of Singapore fit to kiss the mud on her feet."

"Wow!" said the young aunt and laughed with him.

At this moment, he suddenly thought of the time he saw Hamsun walking with her bare feet on the muddy beach when it was low tide.

But he said, "You are a Christian and I am not. There is one line in your Bible which I can appreciate and subscribe to. 'How beautiful are her feet upon the mountains!' Not 'the feet of him that fears the Lord.' It should be just 'her feet.' She was barefoot till she was thirteen or fourteen. She used to come noiselessly upon the grass, stand behind me and close my eyes, and ask, 'Who?' I would say, 'You, of course,' catching her hands. Then she would break away and I would chase her. 'How beautiful are her feet upon the mountains!' She used to get up at five and go with her grandpa to examine the water level in the rice fields, after a night of rain . . . The life in those mountains was so beautiful!"

"Don't be so sentimental. You idealize everything. You are a poet. Farm life isn't all that beautiful. You don't like Singapore, I sense it."

"I don't like it and I don't dislike it. All people don't have to like it. I am an individual. Singapore is a great, big, exciting city. Everything and everybody so tense

around here. Hot, hot, hot! *Satay*, and then cucumber. I am not idealizing farm life or country life. I am talking about Egret's Nest. I mean . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just Juniper and her farm, her grandpa, her mother, her ducks, her lichee yard, and the Egret's Nest. Juniper is hard, hard as an olive stone. There is no nonsense about her. I have seen her slap her younger brother Tienkay real hard when he tried to bully her while she was busy with her chores. Farm life made her tough, taught her the necessity for hard work, for survival . . . It's just that work and play in those high mountains merged so harmoniously that I believe she was playing when she was working . . ."

Inwardly Siu-eng was happy to see the spirit of his father, poor but proud, surviving in the young nephew. She smiled gaily and said, "I think I ought to paint you as a fisherman standing upon a river craft, wearing a coolie hat and a palm-fiber waterproof on your back, holding a punting pole in your hand. That would be the real you."

Silok smiled. "Thank you."

"And not the young lawyer you appear to others. And that's why you are restless. Anyway, Juniper is married. I can understand that she means a lot to you. All the same, it should not prevent you from finding a good girl and getting married. . . . What are you doing this afternoon?"

Silok looked at his watch and said, "I must be going. I have an appointment with Weysen."

Coming out of the school, which was largely deserted on Saturday afternoon, he took a rickshaw and came down by

a sharp descent, to the open area around the museum. He found his friend on Hill Street, in one of the better two-storied buildings. The sun was still hot upon the pavement.

Weysen suggested that they go to the bar in the Adelphi Hotel to cool off, but Silok said he preferred to go to the Lamtian, to be amidst Chinese surroundings. They went down the New Bridge Road, past small congested alleyways. Shops stood behind columns on the sidewalk, their upper stories serving as living quarters for the shopkeepers. The whitewash on these houses, mixed with blues, had peeled off in sections, or deteriorated into bluish streaks as it was periodically washed down by the rain. Except for a few shops around Raffles Place, one could not speak of a "main street" in this city, such as there were in Hong Kong or Shanghai, with resplendent goods behind large glass windows catering to a prosperous middle class.

Weysen and Silok soon found themselves in the congested and generally wet streets of the Chinese section, with its shops, stalls selling vegetables, eating places, and a teeming population of Cantonese and Chaochow maids in queues and wooden clogs, half-naked children, and men with bare backs.

Silok felt inwardly uncomfortable. This was not China and it was not a modern Western metropolis.

He and Weysen went up to the top floor of the Lamtian Restaurant, where tea and Cantonese snacks were served at all hours of the day. Waitresses went about in wooden clogs making a *clack-clack* on the tiled floor, some in queues and others with modern hair-do's. A Cantonese waitress recognized them, for they had come here often.

It was a very large room with twenty or thirty tables.

Near-by, the tables were occupied by patrons having tea, ice cream, or soft drinks. They chose a table in the far corner facing the sea. Weysen ordered a root beer, and Silok a gin and tonic.

They had been friends since their college days. Weysen was from the same town as Silok. He was in a short-sleeved open shirt and gabardine pants. Thin and pale-faced, he had slender fingers. Why is it that Chinese young men good at literature always have a pale face and slender fingers? This contrasted with his shock of stiff hair, with carelessly combed curls and waves, which gave him a lyrically challenging, almost poetic, appearance.

Both of them were good at Chinese and English; their conversation often ranged from strictly current topics to ancient Chinese history and literature which would be beyond the depths of most modern college graduates. In Weysen, Silok found someone he could talk with. Each respected something in the other.

Weysen had developed the habit of leaving a cigarette sticking to his lower lip while he talked, letting the smoke blow across his face and irritate his eyes. He would sit there with eyelids lowered and head tilted back a little. This, plus his trimmed mustache, gave him the expression of a seasoned reporter, knowing everything and believing nothing. Once in a while, his eyes opened wide in brilliant flashes, surveying the surrounding world, which amused him.

Many a time, Silok had heard him say, "As a reporter, I tell nothing but the truth, but God save me from telling the whole truth." Or this: "I never say anything which is

untrue, but also must not say everything which is true. Or I won't be able to keep my job."

He loved his job, but there was no nonsense about it. "I am intrigued by Singapore. It fascinates me. I know all the seamy side of life, and see through the skin of those swaggers and patriotic civic leaders, but must not get under their hair. I listen to all their fine speeches and report them, feeling like the husband of a cinema star who wears falsies and stick-on lashes. I love it, all of it, because I write easily. But I'd be damned if I thought all that trash that I pour out every day could be considered real writing. I am making a living, that is all."

By contrast, by his erect carriage, his well-groomed hair, his perfectly ironed white shirt, Silok gave the impression of a natty, well-dressed and well-fed, athletic young man. Even Ah-hua, the Cantonese maid at home, knew that he was working in an English firm, and pressed his shirt and shined his shoes more assiduously, as befitting a man associated with Englishmen. Each of the two friends admired something in the other which he did not have himself.

Weysen took a big swallow from his glass, and ran his fingers through his stiff, unruly hair. "Like yesterday. I was sitting through a meeting of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Lakjio was making a fine speech. He spoke in a throaty voice, in his usual vehement manner, his dark, knotty hands swinging up and down. Quite a public speaker. I was listening. Yes, I was listening. The point is, the great majority of those there were very nice well-educated people. Our own people. The older generation. Old Lim was there in his starched and ironed white jacket and

trousers, fingering his white beard and opening and closing his fan. The genial, rotund, rosy-faced Tan Kaytsong, the banker, friend of everybody, was there too. And there were others, serious-looking merchants, less rich perhaps, who came there out of a sense of duty.

"They were discussing the need for more secondary schools for Chinese girls. Don't you think all these people knew about Lakjio and all his doings? But all of them sat quietly and listened. He was talking about the loose morals of Singapore and the importance of keeping the virtue of our Chinese girls. People's eyes turned toward each other and exchanged looks. From somewhere came a snicker. He referred to the unspeakable one-piece bathing costumes of European women . . . Light, please."

The hand-rolled cigarette still clung to his lower lip, but became half wet while he was talking. Among other things, Weysen had the habit of running out of matches. His friend offered him a lighted one, and the little white wisp of smoke began to irritate his eyes again, but he continued, "Of course there was no European in the audience. All listened quietly. No one wanted to make trouble. I noticed the applause was desultory . . . Lakjio the illiterate was wearing his glasses. You could see that the glasses never belonged on that tense, muscular face of his. All his facial muscles grew horizontally, as we say . . . Your uncle was there, sitting erect in a rattan chair, and sort of glowering at the speaker, still as a statue, as if he were judging him."

"He and Lakjio don't like each other, I know. You know that piece of antique bronze in our hallway? You see it as you come into the entrance. Uncle takes a special delight in

that piece and puts it there because he outbid Lakjio for it at an auction."

"Your uncle was sitting, tense and erect, in his chair, his hands gripping the armrests. But he didn't make a move.

"Of all things, to hear Lakjio talking about the importance of preserving the virtue of our girls! My God, if you were a reporter like me, you would cease to believe in anything any more. Anyway, there were four of us from the press, sitting in the front row, scribbling away. After the meeting adjourned, Lakjio came to me and asked me if I had got it all. I rattled it off. He listened and was satisfied. You saw the big headline this morning."

"I did. It all came to this. We need a new secondary school for Chinese girls, and the reason we need a new school for Chinese girls is to keep their maidenhead intact . . . Big headline, right on the front page."

"Of course. It is his own paper. He is quite nice to us. He spends a lot of time with us. Invites us to his club when he wants something said to the press. Explains to us why he wants to do so much for the Chinese community. He reminds me of the Dog-Meat General, who meets an American consul while he has a white Russian girl sitting in his lap. Sometimes I almost believe he is sincere."

Silok smiled. "Don't you think he is?"

Weyesen bent over to crush out the cigarette, and his lips curled. "Now, now, you don't believe everything that you read in the papers, do you?"

"I sometimes read the tabloids, too."

"He could hush up the tabloids too. You know Miss Yu Wen, that girl free-lance writer who has that marvelous

style of writing tongue in cheek, an expert at innuendoes? After she had written two articles about Lakjio in a tabloid, very sly and very witty, he quickly gave her a job on our paper. I tell you, Lakjio is one of the smartest men in Singapore . . ."

Weysen tossed his head by way of attracting the attention of the waitress, and said, "Hey, another root beer."

"Have a gin and tonic," Silok said.

"No, I don't like mixing drinks."

Silok told him about his uncle's plan to have him marry Alice Oe and what he had done.

"You fool," said Weysen. "I would tumble for it if I were you. What difference is there between one young girl and another?"

Silok did not know whether his friend was being shallow or being profound.

Weysen added, "Alice is a nice girl, and I wouldn't mind being the son-in-law of Oe Eng-hi. Heavens, I wouldn't mind!"

"And if you couldn't stand the fat old woman?"

"I would make her pay, and pay plenty, for a divorce from her daughter. My dear Silok, you are an idealist. I would go and call on her and make up, even if you don't intend to marry her. There is no point hurting feelings. That is the way the world is made."

"Tell me what you do know about Lakjio."

"You mean what is not printed or unprintable?"

"My uncle tells me some things. How he calls opera girls to his club and keeps women for a few months at a time and then throws them overboard and changes to another."

Weysen puckered his brow. "I don't mind his running

around with young girls, especially poor family girls. That was why the speech yesterday was so funny. And all the audience knew. I would not be surprised if he smuggled girls from Batavia and Soerabaja in return for the arms and ammunition he smuggles into Indonesia. His men at the receiving end would do it for him. That is quite something that our legitimate businessmen don't do."

"Then why is he made president of the Chamber of Guild Representatives."

"Because he wants it, and the others don't."

"What does he *do*?"

"As I was saying, I don't mind those things. What gets me is that when his wife was in a hospital for an operation, he didn't even want to go and see her. Finally he did. Because his sons begged him to."

"And?"

"There are lots of things that decent businessmen simply do not do. We Chinese are law-abiding citizens. The English give us good laws and we obey them. That is why the Chinese prosper in all Southeast Asia, by thrift and hard work and obeying the law. And we respect the English because they themselves respect their own laws. Our businessmen get rich through legitimate business. They would like to cut each other's throats sometimes. All businessmen do. But they don't smuggle and they don't cheat at cards."

"Cards?"

"Mah-jongg. You keep your mouth shut and I will tell you something. They have a beautiful system of flashing signals at the club. A certain Lim from Penang was skinned one night for a hundred thousand dollars."

"How?"

"You know at the club, when mah-jongg is being played, they have waitresses who go around passing wet towels, drinks, cigarettes, fruit. One of them would be instructed to watch the victim's hand. She would go upstairs and make a phone call, making it appear as if it were a call from the outside. Lakjio would grab the wall phone near him and listen. The victim would have no chance as soon as Lakjio's accomplices knew his hand and refused to yield up the suit he was trying to make. This could not be repeated too often, of course. There are other methods. The waitress could go around and ask the victim if he wanted *water*, or *beer*, or *whiskey*. These words stood for different suits. Have you been there?"

"Once or twice."

"You know it is a large square room surrounded by windows on three sides looking out on the sea. Tiny electric lights—red, green, blue, and yellow—are strung across the windows. When the blue winks, the intended victim is playing for the winds. When the red light winks, it means the bamboos, etc. The glare of lights inside is so brilliant that no unsuspecting victim would pay any attention to the tiny lights outside."

"One hundred thousand in one night!"

"What do you think? And Lim remains a slave to him for life. Lakjio can make him do anything he likes by threatening to collect all of it."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, people know. This is the kind of deal that his accomplices cannot help talking about to their intimate friends. Some of the waitresses left and they told."

Silok rose, went to the phone, and called to tell Juana he would be coming home for supper. He came back to the table, paid the bill, threw a fifty-cent tip to the waitress, picked up his sun helmet, and they left. Silok walked with such a lilt to his step that girls looked at him twice.

CHAPTER 3

SILOK TOOK A TAXI, which he knew would take twenty minutes to get to his home. The car came out on Connaught Drive and sped past the Clock Tower and the Esplanade, with the imposing Victoria Memorial Hall on the left.

His mind was a *mélange* of confused thoughts and impressions. He was depressed by what he had heard.

He had been in Singapore six years. The glamour of the great metropolis had begun to wear off. He had never felt that he belonged. This was not China, and it was not an authentic Western city, either. He had not yet found the key that would enable him to identify himself with the foreign port and feel emotionally at home, as his friend had, or as his uncle had.

Business and shipping were the life of the city, to which Silok, by his nature, had never been attracted. The majority of the people were too absorbed in their own business of making a living to think about it—the thousands

of immigrants who came and had never earned the passage back to China; the wharf coolies, carrying a load of a hundred fifty pounds on their backs for a bowl of rice, who had had dreams of wealth when they had come from their homeland. They had come with a pair of bare hands and nothing but the shirts on their backs, to seek a fortune. They had seen and heard of many of their people who had come abroad, and were able to send dollars home several times a year. They hoped to be able to do the same, to send money home to their parents, wives, and children. They found the knocking about hard and grim, and would lie down at night too tired to think of anything. It was a hard struggle for survival, and always had been. A few fought through, by persistence and hard work and by saving every penny they had. A few became millionaires, but the majority made just enough to keep them going. A few went out of their minds—*tiokong*—out of loneliness, homesickness, and sheer despair. *Tiokong* was a well-known form of mental illness, ascribed by the immigrants to magic potions which some Malay women were supposed to have made them drink.

The majority came because their relatives were here and had a shop which they could help look after. And these immigrants poured in by the thousands year after year and spilled over into Malaya, Indochina, Borneo, and the Dutch East Indies, because of the population pressures at home.

The impact of East and West, Silok reflected, was always painful. Here was the well-known international port, with a system of English law and justice and regularly paid police (what a contrast from China!) and civil serv-

ants and banking and finance, all of which were imposed upon a population whose habits of life and social standards were all different. Some had come here for the simple reason that they could find law and justice here that they were unable to find at home—for that and for no other reason—and for that peace and security they had left warm family ties at home.

For the most part, the English felt themselves exiles here, living away from London and Piccadilly Circus and Hampstead, or from Edinburgh or Yorkshire, where everything was familiar and known and taken for granted. The Chinese, too, felt they were emigrants, making their sojourn here for reasons of business, and dreaming of one day returning to their ancestral village, where again everything would be known and familiar and taken for granted.

There were, of course, the Malays, who were truly natives here and had never known any other country, and a great many Eurasians, who were products of the meeting of East and West and were acclimatized to this hybrid way of life in an Oriental port.

Silok thought of Hamsun, whom he was going to meet later that night.

Perhaps it would take a woman to make him feel at home and truly settled here. Many Chinese emigrants had married and settled down and never wanted to go back to their homeland again.

When he got home, they were having supper already. His place at table was laid.

"We knew you were coming. So we didn't wait," said Auntie.

"Oh, Auntie, of course you should go ahead."

Auntie was always like that. Even within the family, her good manners had never left her.

The aunt looked like a woman in her fifties, although she was only forty-five, and she had a sweet, almost saintly look. No doubt, she had made her adjustment to a life which, as she saw it, was to be endured rather than lived. When the uncle had reached forty without producing a son for the family tree, he had promptly taken a concubine, according to the orthodox Confucian tradition. He had taken Juana. Then, all those fine manners that the aunt had learned in her girlhood, the sensitivity and consideration instinctive with her, had served her to good purpose. Nevertheless, her eyes still retained that delicate look which revealed that in her girlhood she might have dreamed of a marriage and a home filled with the noise of children and grandchildren, and not this childless state she was in now. She would endure life sweetly and without useless upsurges of emotion.

Ah-hua had given young Silok a hot towel. After his two gin and tonics, he was in thoroughly good form, and fell to eating with gusto.

"Alice called on the telephone and asked for you," Juana said.

"When?"

"Shortly after you left. I was just going out and told her that you would be back this evening."

"What did she want?"

"She didn't say."

"Did she say I was to call back?"

"No."

That put a different complexion upon the matter, Silok thought.

They went on eating. Silok sensed that the uncle was looking at him from time to time. He had thought the uncle might explode when he saw him after last night, or give him a long lecture, as he often did. But he did not say a word. This rather surprised Silok. Was it the lull before the storm? ~ .

"Lakjio . . ." he said and then, feeling that the atmosphere was not suitable for lighter conversation or pleasantries, he stopped short and ended with: "Oh, well!"

Dinner was over and Silok was halfway up the stairs when the telephone rang.

"It's for you, Young Master," shouted the maid.

Silok turned around and went to the sitting room to take it. Juana and the uncle were watching him.

"Yes . . . Oh, it's you, Alice . . . No, no . . . I am sorry. No, not at all . . . Yes . . ."

"It was Alice." He turned around.

"What did she say?"

"She called up to apologize for her mother. Said she was very sorry . . . that I mustn't mind . . . Asked if she could see me again and then asked me to join her in a game of tennis at her home tomorrow. Under the circumstances, I had to say yes."

The uncle breathed easily and his whole face relaxed.

Juana's eyes were upon Silok, and she asked, "What exactly did she say?"

"She said she had a row with her mother, that she was exasperated, and asked if I was angry."

"I never thought she would make a move like that,"

said Juana. "She must be terribly in love with you. What are you going to do?"

"I suppose I'll have to see her, for form's sake at least."

He threw up his hands, and went upstairs.

The uncle fairly spluttered with a helpless rage. He stalked out of the room and went out to the adjoining tiled terrace, where Juana soon joined him. Silently he lighted a foot-long Chinese pipe, which he often smoked at home, lost in silence. Knocking out the burnt ashes on the floor, he drew a deep sigh and said, "Water flows down, never flows up. I have looked upon Silok like my own son since his father's death. I have supported him through college. After graduation, I had hoped he would be able to assist me in my business. My estate could be his if he had shown some consideration and respect for his uncle. But water flows down, never up. A young man thinks only of himself. As if he owed nothing to me . . ."

"It is not that," explained Juana. "He respects you, I know. He's not unaware of what you have done for him. He told me that he was doing what every law graduate should do, joining a law firm to gain practical experience. There is something in his wanting to stick to his profession."

Juana had long discovered that, despite his outward self-assurance, the *laoyeh*—the Master—was never quite sure of himself. His ringing, firm voice carried easily, whether he was talking or just expectorating. But it was his natural voice. She had discovered that he welcomed a little contradicting if it was done sweetly and politely, as a means of checking on his own judgments. In this way, the uncle had come to rely more and more upon Juana

and found in her a woman he could talk to, whose companionship was both agreeable and helpful. And when she agreed, he was the more pleased at the confirmation of his own opinions.

"I know. But look at me. Today we are a respectable family in Singapore. It took me twenty years to arrive at where I am. Another five years before I felt secure enough to buy this house. I came here at the age of twenty-two. Sweated as a laborer at the rubber plantations. Tried my hand at everything, worked and slaved for ten years before I could save five hundred dollars to go home and get me a Chinese wife. Now the younger generation do not know how hard it is to sweat and starve to make a little money." (He said "the younger generation," although he meant only Silok.) "Silok is a little like his father. I brought his father over, thinking that he could help me. He stayed not more than three years and said he wanted to go back. He said Singapore didn't agree with him. I bought a house for him in Changchow."

"What was his father like?"

The uncle's laughter was broad and low. "Ho! Ho! He was a bit like Silok. He didn't like this and didn't like that. Grandfather was dead, and I liked the idea of us two brothers sticking together and fighting together, like hand in glove. But no, he went back and took up teaching again. Oh, he was proud! From time to time I sent him money, but he would never ask me for a single cent. In a way I was proud to have a scholar in the family . . . But this Silok, I had expected him to have more common sense. He hasn't had to learn it the hard way, as I had to. If he thinks it is easy to earn money, let him try to work

rubber in the hot jungles just for one day! How I would have welcomed the chance to marry into one of the richest families in my young days! He just does not know how lucky he is . . . I don't know what he'll do."

The young woman looked at him, thought for a moment before she said, "He does not seem to go for Alice."

"Then he does not know what is good for him. Probably he'll end up as a poor fool like his father . . ."

They heard the young nephew's footsteps coming down the stairs and then fading away in the direction of the gate. From where they sat on the terrace facing the sea, they could not see him, but they knew he was going out.

The night was beautiful. A steady breeze blew in from the sea. Here, the bay curved southward, and they could see the city lights in the distance, lighting up the sky over the bay and reflecting in a low-lying rosy fog hugging the skyline. Directly in front of them, the sea slept, with only very small waves lapping the muddy shore drowsily. In the middle of the bay was a small dark form, with a couple of lights showing. This was a fisherman's station, fenced in with pilings and nets. Close by, a light shone up from the lawn, lighting up several tall, slanting coconut palms thirty or forty feet high. The noise of tropical frogs came from somewhere, croaking intermittently, like someone having continuous hiccups, as the night darkened.

"Where is he going?" remarked the uncle. "A young man out all day and all night!"

"It's his Saturday night." She tried to cover up for him.

"To meet some girl. I am sure of it."

Juana could detect a slight note of envy. She did not answer. She was not only protecting Silok. In her heart

of hearts she did not want this life ever to change—the life of a complete, small, compact home, a home where she was indubitably the sole companion of her husband and mistress of the house. Sooner or later Silok would marry and things would change, she was sure. By plain instinct, she wanted to ward this off, as long as she could. Certainly she did not welcome snooty in-laws who would tend to differentiate and treat her cheaply.

Hamsun was different. So far she had never seen the girl, but Silok had told her that she was a Eurasian. Her husband would collapse when he found out! On the other hand, a Eurasian woman would hardly fit into a Chinese family. Their ideas were just like those of European women. She might want to live separately.

Juana did not want complications. She wanted this house for herself. She was already helping her husband to manage the estate, and she knew all the employees and had learned all the ins and outs of the business. How she wished she could have a son of her own blood! Besides, she was young and modern and would be intrigued to have a westernized woman for a relative.

They heard a bell and the steps of the maid going upstairs. Auntie must be wanting something, perhaps a pot of tea or a pipe of opium to stay her pains. It was routine and they remained where they were. If she wanted to talk to someone, her husband or Juana herself, the maid would come down and inform them. Between opium and Buddhism, Auntie passed her time easily, and obtained a peace of both body and mind. She usually went out about once a fortnight to burn incense at a temple. At this

hour, or sometimes much later, she would be repeating the Diamond Sutra:

All appearance is void; all void is appearance. All sentient life, all mammalian life, all egg-born life . . . are as a passing dream, as a bursting bubble, as glistening dew, as flashing lightning . . .

Really, she was making a difficult effort to believe that this life of the body and of the senses, including the mind, is an illusion only. To rid oneself of these illusions created by the treacherous senses, and rise above the mortal passions of selfishness and greed and hatred, was to achieve a sense of infinite peace.

Was her life a void? Was Juana a void? One might reach that supreme insight in a flash, for a second, and then slip back again into the world of forms and feelings that the senses and the sentient mind show us.

"But it is silly," said the girl, with a toss of her head. "I don't care, understand me? There are times when one just doesn't care a damn what others say or what others think. Since my childhood, I have always said I can take care of myself, and pity those who can't. Get what I mean?"

As the girl said this, she blew a puff, her lips protruding in a smile of quiet amusement. Her nostrils distended slightly as she tossed her head, brushed her hair back in one quick movement, and rested her chin once more on her hands, gazing into the darkness.

As Silok continued gazing into Hamsun's face and lifted a hand to touch her jet-black hair gently, adoringly, she glanced at him, smiling fondly, and lowered one hand to grasp his. As she did this, an expression of bliss and content spread over her face. Their faces were not more than a foot apart, and their eyes met with the magnetic ardor of a couple about to be engaged. The lights from above the open-air tables showed Hamsun's white profile, her sharp aquiline nose and her long wavy hair.

She held his hand, which was resting on the table, and squeezed it affectionately, her eyes looking at him through heavy lashes. The gesture of holding his hand seemed to say that she wanted to keep it—forever.

Silok took her hand, its whiteness emphasized by her painted fingernails, and kissed it gently yet ardently. He had never come so close to a white woman, and her foreign hair-do, her sharp nose, and especially her heavy, luxuriant lashes all combined to act upon him like a strong liquor. Her eyes, sometimes hard, brazen, or bitter, were now soft. Just now, when she opened her mouth to laugh at something silly, she revealed a set of glistening teeth.

Tonight she had come to the night fair on East Coast Road in a stunning sailor suit—white pants and a white-and-blue striped pull-over, low at the neck—with a chic cap to match. The cap was resting on the table.

Suddenly she leaned far back in her chair, shaking her head so roughly that her hair fell into disarray. Then she leaned her head back, her hands clasped behind it, and looked straight up into the starry sky, saying lazily, "I don't care."

Yes, she did not care that in this position her firm sweated breasts were shown in provocative prominence.

Then she sprang back with great alacrity and rose. Slapping her cap on her head with one hand and holding Silok's hand with the other, she said, "Come on, let's go."

The pair of young lovers walked close together, her arm around his waist, sauntering in a blissful, dreamy fashion and disappearing gradually into the dark bend ahead.

From the moment he had met her two or three months earlier, he had been fascinated by Hamsun's quick moods, her childish vivacity and her more mature, silent aloofness.

One afternoon he had been walking along the coastal road not far from his house when three girls had come bicycling down the bend in his direction. One of them brushed against him from behind, her bicycle wobbled a second and, as it straightened, she looked back and gave a hearty laugh. Before he knew what was happening, he saw the bicycle keel over and her red skirts spread on the ground.

It was his turn to laugh. He went forward and offered to help her up, but she was on her feet already, one hand pressing her knee, the other hand smoothing her hair. The other two girls had stopped also. She picked up her bicycle and tried to guide it, but then her knee hurt and the bicycle almost turned over. Quickly Silok went up just in time to prevent the bicycle from crashing onto the ground.

"Let me hold it for you."

She thanked the unknown gentleman, left the bicycle to him, and limped along.

They had already reached the row of shady trees along the bank, where there was grass to sit on. During this interval, the girl had twice looked at him, somewhat more than casually. The girls placed their bicycles against a tree, and Silok placed the one he was leading against the others.

"Does it hurt?" Susan asked.

Hamsun lifted a corner of her skirt and found a red cut on her knee, mixed with particles of gray dust. A stream of blood was trickling down her calf.

"You must sit down," said the other girl.

She lowered herself slowly and carefully and rested her back against a tree, keeping the wounded leg stretched out in front of her.

"You two go ahead. Don't mind me. I'll just rest here."

Silok was standing over her, looking at her exposed knee and her leg, lying straight out on the grass.

"Can I help? That wound must be treated."

Hamsun's eyes traveled slowly up from his well-shined shoes and white duck pants to his faultless silk shirt, and for a third time she gave him an interested look. "Oh, it does not matter."

"I live near here. I can find something to bind up that wound, just to be safe . . . May I borrow your bicycle?"

The other girls looked and smiled.

"Hey, you didn't fall down intentionally, or did you?"

"Don't be silly."

In a few minutes, Silok was back with a bottle of water,

Red Cross plaster, and some gauze and antiseptic cotton. The bleeding had almost stopped. The wound was a shining surface where little globules of blood oozed a thin trickle around the knee.

The other two girls were getting ready to go down to the beach, but came over to help.

"Go on! I can take care of myself."

Her friends giggled and stepped gingerly down to the beach. It was half tide, the water barely deep enough for a swim. Here the muddy bottom was almost flat, the water was grayish, and one had to go two hundred feet out to get a good swim. The two companions contented themselves with swimming a few strokes and immersing their bodies in the water, standing up waist-deep some fifty feet away.

Silok had squatted down to dress the girl's wound. He thought it an unusual privilege to treat and wash a leg so splendidly formed and so passively and readily outstretched before his eyes. She was not wearing stockings, as most girls did not in the tropics. For her part, the girl seemed to be enjoying being handled by such a handsome, unknown young man, her eyes following his hands and wandering on, to rest finally on his face.

He ended by cleaning up the rest of the bloody spots on her calf with religious care and a rare tenderness. "That'll do it," he said and rose.

To his surprise he found his face was dripping with sweat. He took a clean white handkerchief and mopped it. Up to now he had not had a good look at the girl's face.

She was looking at him with a glad smile. "Oh, you've got a bloodstain on your tie."

Silok looked down and saw small splotches of blood on his white tie. "It does not matter."

"Come on, sit down. Let me clean it for you."

Silok gladly knelt on the ground, while she poured some water from the bottle on the remaining cotton and tried expertly to wash the spot off. He enjoyed this charming gesture and the glimpse of her white breasts beneath her blouse.

The two girls in the water were screaming and laughing and splashing water over each other's face and shouting, "Hey, Hamsun! What are you doing there?"

Silok asked, "Tell me, who are you?"

"Just a silly girl. And who are you?"

"Just a silly boy. I think he is going to be sillier and be crazy about you."

"Oh?!"

Silok had not realized how his fate had been sealed at that moment, and how inextricably and deeply some invisible threads were tying them together. As they met again and again, he discovered in Hamsun a dashing, restless spirit akin to his own, with plenty of spirit and gusto and daring as well as a physical charm and vivacity. He liked her voice, her face, her hair, and above all her deep, dark lashes, so rare in a Chinese girl. They liked so many things in common. She had met him at the right moment; with her he could forget all his loneliness. All his young manhood found in this exotic girl an answer to his romantic dreams. And Hamsun was greatly attracted by him, too, and had never declined an invitation to be to-

gether. They had grown more and more inseparable and needed each other.

Hamsun had a careless abandon, an impulsiveness, and a gay disregard for convention that appealed to him. She was half child and half woman, liable to surrender herself to the pleasures of the moment and forget everything else. Silok himself was something of a rebel against social conventions, aware of his need to do something unusual, to break the monotony of life. He was lonely as adult manhood was lonely, craving for a feminine voice, the touch of a feminine hand, the sight of feminine shoes. What pleased him most that day they first met was the way she was evidently enjoying having her wound dressed by him without any suggestion of false modesty.

He had seen many Eurasian girls, at college and in the city, but had hardly taken notice of them. Nor was it the first time that girls had shown signs of interest in him. But in Hamsun he had realized his ideal—a girl impulsive, daring, and carefree; gay, impassioned, and not very responsible.

Later he had found out that she had a Chinese mother and had been abandoned by her Portuguese father when she was three years old. They were living in Hong Kong then, and after that had drifted to Singapore. They were now living in Bedoc, on the east side of the city. She was working in a milk bar on Orchard Road, where many English-speaking people, especially British housewives and their children, came to have ice cream and cold drinks or buy other dairy products in the late afternoons.

That had been about two months ago. Except for Juana

and his friend Weysen, he had not let anybody know about the girl he had fallen madly in love with.

It was at this time that Silok's uncle had thought about the match with the Oes, and he could not understand why Silok was so obtuse as not to appreciate such a socially desirable and attractive offer.

Everybody agreed that it was time that Silok should be married. He had made up his mind and at the proper time he would let his uncle know. He did not want to disappoint his uncle, or hurt Alice. But he knew it could not be helped. Sooner or later . . .

When a quiet man falls in love, he loves fiercely.

Weysen had teased him about it.

"Oh-ho! Ho! You, too."

"Why shouldn't I? Hamsun makes me feel young and alive."

"I never thought you were the type. *Chiangshan meijen!*"

Weysen was off with his dithyrambic Chinese prose.

A woman's love

Plays havoc with men's heart, ambitions, plans,

Makes fools of the best and wisest of us all.

He loves not his land, but a beauteous queen.

pu ai chiangshan ai meijen

The brief, succinct phrase meant that each of the greatest heroes of history had fallen for some woman, and quite simply that Silok, his friend, also had succumbed at last.

CHAPTER 4

SILOK NOW MANAGED to see Hamsun quite often at the milk bar on Orchard Road. He would order an ice cream or a chocolate sundae and watch her on duty, flitting among the tables. He had told her never to phone his home.

Usually by midafternoon he would be thinking about meeting her, while he labored in his office through large folios of typescript, scrutinizing the revisions and corrections which his boss had made in tiny script, or while he was preparing translations from Chinese documents or just consulting lawbooks.

His office was only five minutes' walk from Raffles Place. It was housed in an old seven-storied concrete building with large doors and very high ceilings. A ceiling fan with large mahogany propellers suspended from steel pipes kept churning hot air and creaking overhead. From where he sat, near a window facing a brick wall about ten feet away, he caught the tail end of the current of warm air.

By five, he would put on his sun helmet and white coat, dash down the two flights of stairs—rather than wait for the wire elevator—past the bearded Gurkha guard, and emerge onto the hot pavement, his mind keen and alive, as if for him the day had just begun.

Usually at this hour, the ice cream parlor was well filled with customers. Hamsun, in her neat white apron, would be busily occupied, but she always managed to pass by and whisper a word or two and then cheerily go on with her duties. He noticed that some young men, and even elderly men, cast lingering looks at her very well-developed figure.

He made a point of coming to see her here for a few minutes if for some reason he was unable to meet her in the evenings.

Juana noticed that his absences in the evenings were becoming more and more frequent. Some days he would make excuses and telephone home to say that he would not be back for supper; then he would drop in to see Hamsun at about seven, when most of the English wives and children had gone home for dinner and the place was almost deserted except for a few stray customers. He would order a soft drink and wait, or go off to a bar in an alleyway around the corner and have a Scotch and soda or a Singapore gin sling to pass the time. Then they would go off somewhere for dinner and spend the evening together.

It got so that the woman at the cashier's desk and Nina, another waitress, knew young Silok as a steady friend of Hamsun's. Seeing her at work was different from seeing her in the evenings. She was sprightly, hopped from table to table, carrying things to the customers, or cleaning up, or picking up tips and dropping them into her apron

pocket. She sometimes looked as if she were being hustled. Silok would see a hardness in her eyes as she glanced down at some of the lady customers. He would be sitting in a distant corner. When she had a respite, she took up her station behind the counter. Her eyes assumed a distant look and she would look through her half-closed lashes, over the heads of the others, in his direction.

Once they found themselves alone in the ice cream parlor. Nina, who came at ten, had left at six. It was about half past seven and the place was empty. Hamsun came and sat down at his table. Mrs. Timar, the cashier; did not mind. She was a dark-skinned woman in her late forties and she had a double chin.

Silok offered his girl friend a cigarette, and Hamsun was about to take it.

"Oh, no, Hamsun. It's against the rules," the cashier said.

Hamsun knit her brows as she put the cigarette away.

"Go and smoke in the back, if you must. But not here."

"Come on," said Silok, pleading with Mrs. Timar.

"I'm sorry. It's the rules." She bestowed a kindly smile on the waitress.

"Oh, well . . . It's not that important," said Hamsun, and gave a sigh. "It'll soon be closing time."

Silok hung around till the shop closed.

As soon as they stepped outside, Silok offered her a cigarette. She accepted it and took a long puff.

"Sometimes I feel so tired that my ankles are numb. I have been on the go since noon. For eight hours one shuffles here and there, on and on, until one doesn't know what one is doing."

They turned the corner, where a sign on the glass bore

the curious name in red-and-black letters: PRINCESS BAR. It was an L-shaped room. The front was half taken up by the bar. To the left was what might be called an alcove, with divan seats along the wall. Four dark oak tables, with diverse initials carved on their well-worn tops, gave the room an intimate, familiar atmosphere. Two dim bracket lights shone from the wall. Also on the wall were a framed old print of a clipper ship and several pin-ups, just stuck on in a haphazard fashion. It was the kind of place where you could leave your hat on the table and nobody would say anything.

Silok had a sherry and Hamsun ordered a light beer. She threw her head back against the wall. Her eyes at that moment had a glassy stare.

"It's not a very pretty life you are having," he said.

"Pretty? I hate it. I am all done out now at the end of the day."

"How much do you get?"

"It depends. I pick up three or four dollars a day in tips. You never can tell. The best-dressed dainty ladies are the most stingy. Sometimes a lousy old man with a sticky shirt who looks as if he has not shaved for a week will throw you a dollar. Last week Nina got a five-dollar tip from a sailor, just for no reason. You go your round and be nice to everybody. That's all." She seemed more relaxed now.

"Tell me more about yourself," Silok said.

"There is nothing to tell. I was left half orphaned at three. Don't remember anything about my father. He was a Portuguese, working in Hong Kong."

Silok had one arm across his chest. He was holding a

cigarette between the fingers of his other hand, his chin out, staring in the direction of the better-lighted bar.

Then he let his hand fall on her lap. Pressing it gently, he said, "I am so happy to have found you."

She snuggled close to him and said, "Me, too."

He planted a nibbling kind of kiss on her forehead and said, "Tell me, why do they call you Hamsun? It is not Chinese, and it does not sound like Portuguese. It's more like a Swedish name."

"It's a pet name, given by my father. My mother says my name was Graciela. After my father was gone, my mother kept on calling me Hamsun."

"She loves you very much?"

"Naturally. I am her only child. Does it sound funny to you?"

"What?"

"My name."

"Now that I know you, it sounds like the prettiest name in the world."

"I'll be very frank with you. I don't want to conceal anything from you, because we love each other. I think the name means 'mermaid's child.' My mother was a 'mermaid'—you know Cantonese—*hamshuimui* (salt-water maid)." In Cantonese this was a term referring to women kept by white sailors.

"And you grew up with her?"

"My mother sent me to school for three years. We came to Singapore when I was ten. Then I went to a convent school. I couldn't stand it. After two years, I left. I never had much of a childhood. I grew up in the streets . . ."

"And blossomed into the most beautiful girl I ever saw."

She slapped his hand playfully.

"You don't like your present job."

"It's not liking or disliking a job. It's making a living. Of course, I like this better than being a governess. I was employed in several English households. I couldn't stand it. You see, they don't treat you like a white girl, and they don't treat you like a Malay. You are in between. Anyway, I like the independence of being a clerk. You do your job for eight hours—then you are on your own. I can't stand people shouting at me and giving me orders."

"I would love to meet your mother."

"Would you?"

"Don't you think I should? Because . . ."

The girl looked at him.

"Because I want to know you better, see how you live, what your room is like, and so on. And because I hope you will say yes when I propose to you."

She turned her eyes to him and said, "You know that I will."

His arm was across her back, and he felt a shiver going through her whole body. Her head was now resting upon his shoulder. She was barely talking, but rather mumbling thoughts which came to her mind.

"Sometimes I cannot believe it. It is like a dream—a dream I have had ever since I was a little girl. I daydreamed a lot, fancied this, and fancied that. A man by my side." Her fingers were playing about on his chin. "And we would have a home and babies, and not live like my mother. It's a hard life, Silok, I tell you. A woman's life fighting all alone in the world is hard, very hard. I know it."

Her fingers now wandered to the top of his head and grasped a lock of his hair.

"Silok, I have several times passed your house and peeped through the gate. Why won't you ever invite me to your house?"

"You bet I will, when the time comes."

Her head jerked up, and she sat up.

"Why not now? Because I am a Eurasian?"

"My uncle is a stubborn man. Stubborn and very, very Chinese. He is as supercilious about his being a Chinese as an Englishman is proud of being English. He has always wanted to fix me up with a Chinese girl . . . I have made up my mind. It is either you, or nobody else. But I'll have to get around him gently, with Juana's help . . ."

"Who is Juana?"

Silok told her.

Hamsun was aware of the racial barrier. As a Eurasian girl, she had always had the feeling of floating between two worlds, the East and the West, and belonging to none.

It was like that in Singapore. There were people of all ethnic groups: Chinese, by far the majority, Malays, who were in their own country, and Hindus, Tamils, Parsees, and Europeans. The East and the West met for business but had never merged. The races had not integrated into a homogeneous community with common customs and beliefs. The Eurasians, some college-educated and some not, worked as employees and lived largely by themselves. Their outlooks, habits, and language were entirely Western, while emotionally they could not be attached to any country, except perhaps the country of one of their parents.

Like Nina, for instance. She was part Spanish and part

Chinese. That was why she was so pretty and had the same beautiful eyes as Hamsun. Susan, her friend, who was working as a stenographer at an English firm, two doors from John Little, at Raffles Place, had an Irish father and a Malay mother. Susan liked to think of herself as only white, pure Irish. She would never think of marrying a Chinese. She was a Catholic but went to an Anglican church, because she felt there were too many Chinese women and children at the Cathedral service. In the English church, surrounded by white people, she experienced a sense of euphoria, of being in the right kind of society, which she craved but whose doors were shut to her elsewhere. Otherwise, she was a pleasant, sensible, healthy young girl, ready to have a home, to cook, and have babies. She drank only bottled, artificially colored orange juice, and would not eat fresh oranges for fear of infection. In short, she was just a modern girl, brought up in a British port, who formed all her ideas from Dorothy Dix, movie magazines, and the commercial advertisements.

Hamsun's house was in Bedoc, near the coast, on the eastern outskirts of town. The area contained monotonous rows of two- or three-storied brick houses, each with a small plot of garden. The house was an old one, built of bricks of a hideous dull red. The top floor was occupied by another family. They had a sitting room, a bedroom shared by the mother, daughter, and a child of four, and a large, bright kitchen opening out on a small backyard, overlooked by another row of uniform brick buildings.

Coral Ma, or Madam Ma, wore her hair thick and pomaded. She was in her forties, had put on some flesh, but

still could be very attractive if she were in better circumstances. Like most Cantonese women, she wore pajama pants of black lacquered *chienchou*, a kind of Chinese wash-and-dry linen, and slippers at home. Like most women in the tropics, she wore no stockings. She had a kind of rough-and-ready cordiality for everybody and greeted Silok with an open smile when he was introduced.

"You must pardon us for the disorder. It's very kind of you to come. Hamsun has been talking all the time about you, and I was dying to have a look at the young man she so adores."

Silok gave a quiet, dignified smile.

"We have no pretensions," Coral Ma said in a tone which set him at ease immediately.

"But you have an incomparable jewel in your home."

He glanced at Hamsun. But the mother was quick to catch the meaning.

"Well, she is a jewel for me anyway," she said. Coral Ma had eyes which when fully opened stared into men's minds.

A dark maroon sofa, very much in need of reupholstering, stood beneath a window hung with heavy dark curtains drawn to shut out the strong sun. A few odd chairs, a Cantonese hardwood lounge-chair, with long wooden slats sticking straight out for a footrest, and a round teak dining table completed the furniture. A telephone stood on a low corner table. The wallpaper was in dark greens and dark reds. The place did not even have the air of shabby gentility.

Silok noticed the mother had very fine white skin, and he began to like her firm round face. She was a chain smoker. Her daughter had told him that she practically

existed on beer and cigarettes; she would have nothing but beer and a bit of sausage for her lunch though she always had a good, hot supper when Hamsun came home.

All this time, Hamsun had stood by, her hand upon his shoulder or her arm around his back.

"You wanted to see my home. Now you've seen it." She added to her mother, "He said he wanted to know everything about me, where I sleep, where I eat . . . Do you want to see the rest, too?"

"Certainly I do."

She led him by the hand, first to have a look at the bedroom. There were a pair of twin beds, and a cot on one side, along the wall that had a window in it, facing the back; a large dressing table, with an adjustable, large oval mirror at the back, incongruously ornate, which must have been picked up at an auction; a huge, secondhand, black wardrobe, with big square brass handles, which did not go with the rest of the room. Silok stood a few feet inside the door and glanced around.

"Who sleeps in that little cot?"

"My child. He is getting too big to sleep in it. Now he sleeps with me, or with his grandma."

"Your child?"

"Yes. You saw him as we came in."

She pulled him along so he could see the well-lighted kitchen, and with a sweeping gesture said, "Now you have seen all."

Silok gave her a quick kiss and thanked her.

"You are surprised that I have a child?"

"You never told me that you were married before."

"I was not. That child is my *niehtsang*."

She said it simply, without embarrassment, and left it for him to draw conclusions.

They came back to the parlor. Coral Ma looked up with a placid smile and said, "Now you've completed the tour of inspection of my little mansion."

"Yes. I am delighted. It is your daughter's home. That is what it means to me. And I am delighted to have met her mother."

"The pleasure is mutual. I want you to feel welcome here. She adores you, you know."

"And I adore her."

Silok and Hamsun exchanged a smile.

The mother went on to ask about his work and his family, salting her remarks with a pleasant, wry sarcasm. Her voice was young and strong. She said she was not averse to having her daughter marry a gentleman, rather than the bastards. For her the men around town were all "bastards."

When Silok took his leave, she extended both arms and said with an open, direct look, "You must come again. Drop in any time."

When he had left, she turned to her daughter and said, in a tone of disappointment, "I thought he was coming to ask me for your hand."

"Oh, Mother! . . . Do you like him?"

"Very. He is really a handsome young man. Very good manners and serious-looking, and he has a nice position."

She went over to the lounge-chair. Her face suddenly looked withered as she said, "Oh, I'm tired. Tired of all this bitter struggle and skimping and saving. I wish one day you would be well married and we would have a home of our own."

"He has practically asked me to marry him. Mother, don't you think he is wonderful? He says such sweet things to me. It makes a girl feel good, to feel that she is being truly loved.

"And didn't you promise him?"

"He understands. I don't have to say it in so many words. But so far he hasn't taken me to meet his family. There's a Juana . . ."

"Juana?"

"That is his uncle's concubine."

"Have you met her?"

"No."

"Well, my dear child, you are young and you have very good looks. Don't make a mistake, as your mother did. I'm glad you got rid of that bastard Lakjio."

"I didn't get rid of him. He threw me out."

"The point is, this boy seems to me very decent. He seems serious. If you let him slip out of your hand, it will be your own fault."

CHAPTER 5

THE NATIONALIST FORCES had now reached the Yangtze and were poised on the bank before resuming their northward march. The Nationalist Government had been established at Nanking. Big powerful forces still remained in the North, and the unification of the country was not to be completed until two years later.

With the fall of Nanking, the forces of the once powerful General Sun Chuangfang, controlling the southeastern provinces, had collapsed, surrendered, or otherwise disintegrated and disappeared. Some who did not stand along the direct line of march were still holding out, waiting for a good price for their surrender to the Nationalist powers, hoping to be incorporated while retaining their local control, or to be reassigned to different units.

The picture was confusing. While en route, in Kiangsi, Chiang Kai-shek had discovered clear enough evidence of the plot of the Russian advisor Borodin to turn the Kuo-

mintang revolution into a Communist bid for power. At Shanghai, Chiang had struck decisively and made a definite break with the Communist allies. Borodin went to Hankow and a large portion of Kuomintang leaders went with him and established a rival "leftist" government there, each claiming to represent the true Kuomintang.

Some kind of local arrangement had been made with the local commanders at Changchow. Tan Sengtai, Silok's uncle, decided that he had to go home to look over the new situation and see about re-registraton of his properties with the new local government.

With his uncle away, Silok sometimes arranged parties at the house for his friends. Sometimes he came home alone with Hamsun, had supper, and spent the evening on the terrace facing the sea, or went out with her again.

Hamsun had been introduced to the auntie and Juana, and the latter did her best to make her feel welcome. Each for her own reason, Juana and Hamsun went out of their way to be friends. It suited Juana very well that Silok should marry a foreign girl.

Sometimes Silok went out for the whole night and did not come home till three or four in the morning. He had asked Hamsun if her mother would mind, and the girl had assured him that she would not.

Silok sometimes accepted an invitation from Alice to her parties, but most of the time he excused himself. He had not invited her out once.

With the absence of the uncle, Juana enjoyed more liberties. The Morris car was at her disposal, and she often went to town, sometimes to the office. She was also more lively and more restless.

Some days she would telephone from a hotel and ask Silok to join her for lunch. At such times, she was always very well dressed. With her fine, smooth skin and her make-up, she looked like a young girl in her early twenties.

They had many things to talk about—their business, their friends, her doings in town, and above all she always liked to ask what he had been doing with Hamsun. Sometimes she embarrassed him.

"Where did you go?" she asked one day.

Silok felt he needed her help. So he was careful in his answer. "To the usual place," he said.

"Where?"

"Round the coast. She wants to marry me and I want to marry her. You must help me when my uncle returns."

"Of course. I have always been very fond of you, you know that. Do you think I have real influence over your uncle?"

"Of course. Women always have influence over their men."

"I am trying my best to be of help. He is getting old. Sometimes he does not remember things. You didn't tell me what you did all night on the beach."

"We did what young lovers usually do. We talked of love and we kissed."

"Is that all?"

As Silok did not wish to reply, Juana looked at him and her lips curved in a smile.

"Well," she said. "I must be going home now. I've been shopping all morning. I just want you to know that I will do anything you ask me to."

What did she mean? What exactly did she mean? If her

words were not clear, the full steady look she gave him and the lingering touch of her hand should have left no doubt in his mind. He saw her to the car and went back to his office.

One day he received a telephone call from her from a hotel. She said she had to see him on some important business.

"There are things I must speak about to you and to you alone. It is very important."

"What business?"

"I cannot explain it over the phone. Can you excuse yourself?"

"Y—es . . . I think I can."

"Say you have to visit a very sick relative. Say anything. I am at the Nanyang Hotel. Come for lunch. We can discuss things afterwards and you can go back to your office."

At lunch, she did not touch on the business but was evidently very excited and a little nervous. The skin around her eyes was perfectly smooth, and the wisps of side curls made her very attractive. Sometimes her eyes seemed all black.

When lunch was over, she said, "Come up to my room. I have booked a room here upstairs. We can't discuss things here."

They went up in the elevator, which took them to the third floor. When they had reached the door, she opened it with a key, carefully put a "Do Not Disturb" sign outside, and then locked the door from the inside.

It was a large-sized room. The blazing sunlight came through the window. She went and pulled the shutters halfway back.

"Take off your coat. It is so hot. Do you want to wash?"

Silok took off his coat and put it on the back of a chair.

"I am comfortable," he said.

"Don't you want a wash? Really not? I must. I have been perspiring all morning."

With that she disappeared into the bathroom. Silok sat there, wondering what the devil the business was that she had asked him to come and talk about in such privacy.

After a while, he heard her calling, "Silok, give me my comb and lipstick."

"Why don't you come and get them?"

"I can't . . . Please get them. They are in my bag."

After a while, she said, "Lipstick and comb. Find them?"

When he tapped at the bathroom door, she opened it enough for him to see that she had nothing on except a towel that only half covered her breasts. She stretched a bare arm to receive the articles.

Another five minutes passed, and she came out in her pink slip bordered with white lace.

"You don't mind. It's so devilish hot in here, and we are alone."

She went and sat down on a sofa. She had really nothing on except the transparent slip. Then she stood up to turn on an electric fan and slapped the sofa.

"Come on. Sit down."

Silok saw clearly what she was up to. He had seen her at home in all sorts of disarray, but this was the limit. She was really looking very pretty, having touched herself up carefully. When a woman was in her slippers and had let her hair down in a queue, she could look like a very young girl. Hesitantly he went and sat down.

"Now we are really alone. We can have a real talk."

"What about?"

She lifted a hand to brush a lock that was constantly falling over Silok's forehead, and spoke in her usually low voice, half smiling. "Don't be silly. The other day you asked me for my help. Of course I will do something to help if you ask me. Perhaps you can do something to help me, too."~

"That depends on what it is."

"Don't think that I am taking advantage of your uncle's absence. The old foggy, he doesn't understand what a young man wants. I am young and do. I also have a problem . . . Give me a cigarette."

Silok took one from his pocket and, as he lighted it for her, their faces came very close. She held his hand to steady it, glancing up at him. Silok's face was flushed. He felt distinctly uncomfortable.

She blew a long, slow puff, managing to let her hand fall with his, as it fell. She said, "Sometimes I feel so lonely. There is no one that I can speak to about it except you . . ."

"Tell me."

"First you must tell me that you care enough to do what I want. Do I please you?"

The question was irrelevant, and seemed unnecessary.

"Juana, please, what is troubling you?"

"Do you think I have no problems?"

"With yourself, or our family?"

"With myself and our family. I can't speak about it until you tell me that I please you, that you like me very much."

"Juana, I like you . . . very much. But what is it?"

"That is better." She sank lower into the sofa, wrinkling up her slip. Looking up at the ceiling, she said as if talking to herself, "Silok, I will tell you everything, things your uncle need not know and cannot understand. The old foggy always snores in his bed. I am a light sleeper and often lie awake—thinking of things, of myself and the future of our family. When the foggy passes away, there will be only we two, right?"

"Right."

"I mean your aunt isn't interested in the family affairs. She wants to save her soul only. She and her Buddha—" Here the young woman gave a few chuckles. "We two will take up from there. Wouldn't it be better if we came to know each other better? Sometimes I wonder why you are so aloof from me. Last night, I heard you coming in about two o'clock. As I told you, I am a bad sleeper. Don't you think I felt something? I couldn't go to sleep again. I listened to your steps coming upstairs. I heard you clicking on the light . . . I got up and looked at the light on the verandah coming from your room . . . I . . . I . . ."

Suddenly she broke down and fell weeping across his chest. "Silok, please. I love you so much."

How had he allowed himself to be trapped into such a situation? He admitted being attracted by her physically, but his whole training was against such a relationship in the family. Not that he wouldn't dare if he had loved her.

He felt the soft weight of a woman's head upon his chest and her arms tightening around his body. Here was Juana, who had always been so self-possessed, breaking down completely, weak and clinging and weeping like a child. What was he to do?

"Juana! Juana!" he said softly, holding her shoulder and gently pushing her.

The young woman raised her head toward him, eyes wet, pleading and willing. For a moment, Silok was hypnotized. Their faces were close together. Suddenly she forced a kiss on him.

He responded, hesitated, and then broke off.

"You mustn't . . . We mustn't . . ."

"Silok! I am surprised at you!"

For two full seconds, their eyes met in a penetrating silence, each fathoming what the other was thinking, hers revealing a combination of puzzlement, disappointment, and a lingering, burning affection.

"A moment ago you said you liked me."

"Juana, please . . . Please understand . . . I am not insensible to your charms . . . you are my aunt."

Juana turned her eyes toward the window, a tear rolling slowly down and leaving a wet streak on her face.

Silok thought she should be offended, or angry. Evidently she was not. Perhaps she truly loved him; perhaps she had extraordinary presence of mind.

Without turning her face toward him, she said, still looking out the window, "You don't like me."

"Juana, I do. It's . . ."

"Forgive me, then. Forget that it ever happened."

"Of course. You are my aunt."

"I am not your aunt. I am just a poor, lonely young woman. A woman doesn't like to beg for love. I begged and you refused."

"Don't you see . . . our family relationship . . ."

"Let's not talk about it any more."

She lifted a corner of her slip to wipe her eyes. Silok hastily pulled out a handkerchief.

She sniffed into the handkerchief. When she next spoke, she was more self-possessed.

"Our relationship hasn't changed?" she asked, turning to look at him.

"I hope not."

"Nothing will change the fact that we two, you and I, will be the only young people in the family, now and in the years to come. Have you ever thought of that?"

"Frankly, no."

Juana was pursuing her own thoughts. "Your uncle has no son."

"I've never thought of that." The thought of inheritance had really never entered his mind.

"I must say you are a queer breed. You have never thought that if you were nicer to your uncle, you might come to share his property, or he might even make you his heir. You offended him terribly when you insisted on paying back what he had given you during your years at college."

"Did I really?"

"Of course. It's like saying he is not your own uncle. Why are you so stubborn? And you don't understand my position . . . you don't. How I wish I had a son!"

Silok was beginning slowly to understand the line of thought of the young woman sitting next to him.

"May I be very frank with you? . . . You may wonder why I asked you to come and did this today. In the first place, I wished that you and I could come to a closer understanding. I thought you were afraid. Since you did not ask me,

I had to ask you. In the second place, you did squander your favors on someone outside, why not on one who is so close to you at home?"

"I love Hamsun. I hope you understand."

"May I proceed? I feel I have to explain. I don't know how or when I realized that I loved you. We are thrown so close together every day. I am twenty-seven, only two years older than you. When I heard you say that you loved Hamsun, it hurt me terribly, inside. Can you understand? I crave for a son of my own. I say to myself, if it is to be someone else's blood, why not one of the Tan family? Your uncle need not know. If it is like you, there will be a family resemblance. Why not? Do you understand now?"

"I do," he replied, marveling more and more at this woman's thoughts. "And I hope you understand why I can't do it."

Juana threw her head back. "You are a queer fellow." She gave a kind of desperate chuckle. "Once a mountain boy, always a mountain boy. Silok, have I made myself clear?"

"You have."

She seized his hand and said, "We will be good friends, very good friends."

"Yes."

Before he knew it, she had implanted a hot kiss on his mouth. In spite of himself, he responded. Then she broke off and said languidly, "Forgive me. I am satisfied. I had to do it."

"Will you please try to remember that I love another woman? Will you think of yourself as my aunt? . . ."

"Who loves her nephew very much."

Silok rose from his seat, and Juana had to permit his hand to slip out of her grasp. He said with a kind smile, "You are very upsetting, you know."

"Thank you."

He put on his coat, looked at her twice, bent to pinch her cheek, and said, "We mustn't repeat this at home. We must be careful."

"Leave it to me. I can't afford it."

He went out and closed the door, and drew a long, long breath.

How Juana had thought it all out! There were more than merely sentimental reasons for her wanting to have an affair with the nephew, the sole prospective heir of the uncle's property. A proposal such as she had imagined would insure her security. Her son would be his son. On the other hand, the uncle could take another woman, if she had no son. How she had tried to solve her problem, and in so unusual a way!

He had no idea how today's event was going to affect his future.

CHAPTER 6

THE UNCLE CAME BACK in about a month, bringing a lot of news from home. Changchow had changed; the city wall had been torn down, and a macadamized road was being built for motor vehicles. Everywhere there were the new Kuomintang flags and giant portraits of Sun Yat-sen, and girl workers in post offices and banks. Women were wearing permanent waves and long gowns. Young girls usually wore a Dutch bob. Placards were everywhere bearing the party slogans: "Abolish Unequal Treaties," "Abolish Extraterritoriality," "Obey Sanmin Doctrine," etc., etc. Young party workers wearing the *Chungshan* uniform were seen everywhere.

The family was gathered to hear news from home. Aunt Siu-eng had been informed of her brother's return and had come, too, besides Auntie Tan, Juana, and Silok himself.

The uncle looked very happy and rested. His eyes were brighter and he talked with enthusiasm about all that he

had seen. He had evidently enjoyed this visit to his homeland, which he had not seen for ten years, and was well pleased with what he had been able to do. His voice boomed.

"I had a week in Kulangsu and a week in Changchow. Things are looking up at home. I was entertained every night. The new magistrate, hearing of my return, gave me a dinner. All our clan relatives came. I gave a thousand dollars to the school in our village of Golisoa. They told me they needed a new building. Some poor relatives were staying at our house in Changchow. The roof was leaking and I gave instructions to have a second story added to the east wing and have the house repainted, and the broken stones in the courtyard replaced with new ones.

"Did you see my mother?" Silok asked.

"No, she was not too well. I was not able to go up the West River to see her. But your sister Bekum came to Changchow when she got word that I was back. She gave me news of your mother. She is suffering from coughs at night. They were all asking about you and when you would get married."

"They?"

"Yes. Do you know who came with her? I didn't know that your Fourth Maternal Aunt had such a charming daughter. She is your Fourth Maternal Aunt's daughter, isn't she?"

"Yes." Silok's heart palpitated. "You saw Juniper this time?"

"Is Juniper the cousin whom I heard Silok talk about?" asked Juana wistfully. Aunt Siu-eng bit her lip.

"Yes. She was asking how you were doing and wanted

to know everything about you. Said you two grew up together. I don't remember ever seeing her before. Or if I did, she must have been a mere child. I have been away so long. So she is your maternal cousin."

"Yes. Her mother and my mother had the same grandfather."

"Well, she called me Jitiu"—he smiled at the word that meant second brother-in-law of one's mother—"and I felt proud to have such a niece. She was so warm and friendly. Her eyes creased when she smiled. I understand her grandpa has passed away and she is running the farm all alone."

Aunt Siu-eng added, "I know her very well. When she was twelve or thirteen, she was already very active and helping her mother."

"That was Juniper," said the uncle. "When I was in Changchow, she was always asking, 'Jitiu, would you like to have this? Jitiu, would you like to have that?' One is always proud to see good sprouts in the younger generation. I told her that I would like to bring her over with me. But she said, No, she couldn't leave the farm. She begged me to tell you that she wanted you to go home and see your mother. Your mother is ill and alone and needs looking after . . . Oh, here, she sent things for you and a letter . . . Also one from Bekum."

There were packages lying on the center table—packages of dried lichee and dried lungyen. There were also the famous fiber and velvet flowers, for women's hair decorations, for the aunt and Siu-eng and everybody. There was one package marked for Silok.

Silok opened it. To his great surprise, he found a chunk

of *hoatke*, a kind of dark, sweet pudding, which the sender knew Silok loved very much. And around it were sweet-scented lichee leaves and a few lichee stones. It was almost childish of her, as if to remind him of their childhood games.

Silok opened Bekum's letter. It contained much news from home.

The other envelope held the letter from Juniper.

Silok was incredulous.

"No! She cannot write! She has never written letters to me."

"I saw her writing the address on the envelope myself."

Yes, it was handwriting, childish, ill-formed, ludicrous, pathetic, touching. Silok's heart jumped with a mixture of happiness and unbelief. He felt he wanted to cry.

Avoiding the others' eyes, he dashed upstairs with the envelope in his hand. He threw himself on his bed and laughed. He wanted to read, but the tears kept blurring his eyes. He had a good, good cry. It was not important that he had not yet read it. He had something in her own writing in his hand.

It was a few minutes before he calmed himself and started to read, when Siu-eng appeared at the door.

"Why, Silok, what's the matter?"

Silok was smiling through his tears, unashamed. At that moment, he looked like a big, grown-up child.

"I told you that she has begun to teach herself to read and write. What does she say in her letter?"

The letter lay on the bed, looking like a page torn out from an exercise book, with oversize letters.

"Haven't read it yet," he said. "Read it for me."

Siu-eng glanced at his wet face and picked up the letter. Silok sat up and they read it together. The characters were formed laboriously. Some elements of the ideographs were quite well and nobly made but were put too closely together or too far apart from each other, and the line wobbled. Siu-eng could not help laughing.

The letter read:

Dear Silok:

Your mother is ill. Since sister married, she is alone. I am doing my best because she is your mother. Bong-ah is very good and clever and is growing up every day. Please Silok, your mother wants to see you. Please come home. I want to see you, too.

Cousin sister,
Juniper

Aunt Siu-eng and Silok each held a corner of the letter. "Not bad," said Silok.

"Very good indeed," said Siu-eng, "considering that she is just beginning . . . What is this?"

Silok had not noticed a photograph which had fallen out of the envelope. It was a portrait of herself, resting one hand on the shoulder of a small boy standing by. There were the same lively smile, the same bangs and dark eyes and olive face. Her long cotton print gown revealed a slim figure. Juniper had always been slim. Bong-ah's eyes had a bright, mischievous look.

Silok grew silent. He had never seen her in a modern dress. Siu-eng gave him the package he had forgotten to take up with him and said, "Well, I will leave you alone. I will tell them you are crying . . ." She was teasing him.

"Please, Sarkor. Please don't go. She is asking me to go home. Shall I?"

Siu-eng bent her head and thought for a while. "You have not seen your mother for almost two years now. You should, if you can arrange it. Honestly I think it will do you good . . . I don't know—I have seen you looking so restless and troubled . . . I must go down now. Aren't you coming down?"

"I will, after a while."

When Silok was left alone, he stared at the letter and the photograph alternately. He picked up the opened package. The strong scent of the lichee leaves assailed his nostrils, reminding him of the dreams of childhood he had been unable to forget, a world he seemingly had lost and could not find the language to express, a world still lingering in his memory which he wished to recapture but felt he could not. Yet he had faith in those dreams, dreams of hearty laughter, and keen delights, of genuine affection and simple trust, and unbounded faith in his capability for accomplishing great things. He had faith also in dreams of innocent unawareness of men's deceits and women's wiles, of a heart hitched to the stars, unafraid though lonesome like them—those stars that he and Juniper had looked at lying on the grass together, surrounded by the awesome peaks of the Stonepit and the Southern Hills. Where had those dreams vanished? Was the keeping of the child's heart with the experience of adult manhood possible? Couldn't he play while he worked and work while he played, as Juniper seemed to be able to do? What if he kept on believing in those dreams? Would he not be hurt? How would he be hurt?

Here was Juana. No doubt Juana loved him. But Juana's was a complicated love. It was also "important family business," so different from Juniper's giving of herself to him, wholehearted, uncalculating, given out of the sheer joy of loving.

This was his problem. Could he live an adult life and keep those dreams of his childhood, keep the world Juniper had given him and shown him, the world which she now wanted to remind him of by sending him those childish bits of lichee leaves and the lichee stones which she most probably had chewed off and spat out herself from those mobile, protruding lips?

What then did Juniper want of him? What could come of it? Or was this gesture in sending him the letter and these things just another of those acts of childhood—wholehearted, clean, impulsive, unpremeditated, and unmindful of consequences?

Should he, or should he not go back?

He made an effort to get up and go down for dinner. Probably he had kept them waiting.

"Young Master, dinner is ready!" shouted Ah-hua from the bottom of the stairs.

"Coming."

"A guest came to see you," said Juana when he had reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Who?"

"Your friend, Hamsun. I told her that Uncle was back and invited her to come in. But she said no. I told her that I would introduce her to everybody, as we are having a family dinner and everybody is here. She said, 'No, another time.' 'Any message?' I asked, and she said, 'No.' "

Silok sat down to dinner and enjoyed the happy occasion, with the uncle talking most of the time. The uncle was saying again that he would be happy to find a bride from the home town for him.

"Bekum was asking about it too. It would be so easy to pick a girl from our home town, with good breeding and manners and understanding of our customs, to make a good wife for you and a good daughter-in-law for the family. We can pick and choose. Any girl would be happy to marry into our family and come abroad. After all . . ."

That night, the uncle drank a little more than usual. He had said he wanted to go out and see some of his friends. But he was clearly tired, and they urged him to retire early. Juana accompanied him upstairs and put him to bed.

As Auntie Siu-eng was still there, Juana came down again to join them. The aunt had retired to her room as usual.

Siu-eng was dressed in a short-sleeved beige dress of fine linen cut with a striking simplicity which seemed planned. Her hair was brushed straight back. She wore no jewels. Her dress was like her personality. She was sitting at the round marble-topped teak table near the entrance to the terrace, talking with her nephew.

"May I join you?" asked Juana sweetly.

"Please. We are chatting about home," replied the young aunt. "I shall be going soon."

"Please don't go yet. The old man fell asleep instantly the moment I laid his head upon the pillow."

Siu-eng smiled. "He drank a bit too much. I think he was very happy to come home. We were talking about Silok's father."

"Tell me about him."

"He was very much older than I," said the young aunt. "We were not born of the same mother. Grandfather was dead, and he was taking care of me. I practically grew up under him. He talked only about books and poetry and taught me to paint."

Juana had never been to the Changchow home and she was anxious to pick up all the details.

"Didn't Silok's father have an imperial degree?"

"No. That was Grandfather—my father. Silok's father did take part in the imperial examinations, but he failed. That does not mean anything. Many great scholars could not write the formula essays required. One can't write really good essays by the official formula."

"Do you know the *paku* formula essays?" asked Juana. In the examinations for civil service, one had to write essays in eight definite paragraphs or movements; a concisely stated opening theme, definition, amplification, illustrations, etc.

"No. By the time I grew up, the imperial examinations had been abolished."

Siu-eng sat for a while and rose to go. She said that she had school work to do and left.

"Do you want to go up?" Silok asked Juana.

"No. It's early yet. It is cool down here. The old man is fast asleep. He won't be needing me. I'd rather sit here and talk awhile, unless you want to retire."

"No," answered Silok and remained coldly silent.

"You said one day you would tell me about Juniper. You seemed so excited when you dashed upstairs with her letter."

"Yes. She has learned to write. I was so surprised. She

sent me a photo . . . Wait a minute. I will go up and get it."

"Don't bother. I will come up with you. Strictly Platonic, I mean."

They went up together and left the door open. He found the photograph of Juniper and her child on a bedside table. Juana grasped it and walked over to the desk, snapped the table lamp on, and looked at it with an interested smile.

"I see a wonderful vivacity in her eyes. And the child is adorable. He has eyes like yours."

"You think so?"

"I see that bright concentration in his eyes, just a trifle meditative and preoccupied, wondering what life is all about. Isn't he sweet inclining his head and resting against his mother's lap?"

"What do you think of the mother?"

"Very charming, very active, I think. I can tell she will take very good care of the child, and with ease."

"With ease, that's the word. I bet she will. She took care of her house, cooking, washing, everything, with ease, and laughing over it. You mustn't get the wrong impression. She does not dress like that when she does work at the farm. You may call that her holiday dress. We used to call her 'Olive,' because she was small, oval-faced, and as hard as an olive stone. Born of those mountains. You never saw mountains, I believe."

"We have mountains in Wusih, on the Tai Hu."

"I have never seen the mountains in your district. But those near my home are real mountains, not the contemptible hills you see in Singapore. Mountains that awe and inspire and lure. Peak upon peak, mysterious, elusive, enormous."

He spoke with a sudden enthusiasm, as if he were pouring out a long-kept secret, so that the listener was puzzled and taken by surprise. He continued, "You have no idea. If one grows up in such mountains, they change one's point of view, get into one's blood as it were . . . They are overpowering, they"—he stopped to find a proper word and slowly said—"they *h-u-m-ble* you. Juniper and I grew up in those highlands. They are my mountains and Juniper's mountains. I don't think they have ever left me—or ever will . . ."

Juana's eyes opened wider and wider at hearing this talk. She couldn't follow it all. For all she knew, he was getting mystical, talking of influences difficult for others to feel.

"You mean you treasure memories of those mountains."

"Not just treasure. They get in your blood. Once a mountain boy, always a mountain boy. You may say there is a highland view of life, and a lowland view of life. They will never meet."

Juana smiled mysteriously. "I don't understand what you are talking about. All I know is that you are a queer fellow."

"I will make it plain for you. I've got a highland point of view. My uncle has a lowland point of view. Flat, down to earth, looking down, not looking up."

"Perhaps I am beginning to get it."

"Let me put it another way. Suppose you grew up in the high mountains. You measure everything by them. When you see a skyscraper, you mentally compare its height with the peaks you are used to seeing, and of course that makes the skyscraper look ridiculous, puny. You get what I mean?"

And so with everything in life. Men, business, politics, money."

Juana threw her head back and gave a low chuckle. "Oh, well . . . People do admire skyscrapers. They don't make those comparisons like you."

She traced her way slowly around the desk and stared at the photograph of the Egret's Nest on the wall. It was badly exposed, badly fixed, and had begun to yellow. Everything was bad except the composition. To the right was the Egret's Nest, a combination of several perpendicular granites, some sixty or seventy feet high, with shrubbery growing out of the fissures. Below, on the edge of a slope, sat a boy and a girl, about twelve or thirteen, their backs to the camera, looking together at the distant faint hill lines against a clear summer sky.

"This photograph evidently means much to you."

"Of course. I like to look at it from time to time; it reminds me of the days of my childhood. I had a very happy childhood in those mountains. We used to chase each other on those slopes below, which you can't see in the photograph. A little to the right lies a deep chasm with tumbling rocks and a cool stream, and over on the other bank are impenetrable thickets." Pointing to the two sitting figures, he continued, "That is Juniper and that is me."

Juana could faintly detect the pigtail the girl was wearing. "You don't forget, do you?"

"No, not ever. Naturally the days of our childhood, the food we ate, the mountains we lived with, the river where we used to catch shrimp and crayfish and cool our feet—

simple, childish things—you don't think about them. But they are in the back of your mind all the same. They are with you all the time."

"Was Juniper older or younger?"

"We are of the same age. My own home was down in the valley. She lived in the uplands on the Western Hills, about a mile and a half away. She would come down to the valley on country fair days and bring us fresh vegetables, or bamboo shoots, or some rice pudding her mother had made. Some days, especially on hot summer days, we would go up—my mother and her mother are cousins, as you know—and spend a whole afternoon at the Egret's Nest. It was so much cooler up there, and the view superb. Their cottage stood on a spur of the Western Hills. Up there, I often saw her figure silhouetted against the sky. A girl is so much prettier when she stands in the open, head against the sky and hair blowing in the wind."

"Is that what you call the highland view of life?"

"Yes. You stand straight. You don't bow, and you don't buckle. You don't grovel before anybody. That's the way your bones are set."

"I am beginning to understand that distant look which sometimes comes into your eyes . . ."

She left him with a kindly good-by, and went back to her room.

CHAPTER 7

A READING LIGHT WAS SHINING above Silok's headboard. He was completely alone and felt relaxed. He nibbled at a slice of the *hoatke*—which looked very much like a pumpernickel and tasted very much like it—that Juniper had sent him through the uncle along with the other things. He felt as if he were home, almost a boy once more.

He had just written a letter home, addressed to his sister, saying that he was planning to come home for a visit, as soon as he could arrange it. He would let her know by telegraph when he had a definite date of departure. He had also enclosed a separate letter for Juniper.

A series of images floated across his mind, as he recalled his courtship days with Juniper.

Juniper had grown up into a young girl of eighteen. Her body had fully developed and she was no longer a thin waif of a child. One day, returning from Changchow,

Silok came up to see her. He saw her working at a hand mill in the kitchen. It was his first day home after half a year's absence. He was still some fifty feet away. Her head turned and, as she saw him, her arms froze on the wooden handle. He stood transfixed and didn't say a word. Nor did she. And ever so slowly, her arms began to move and the hand mill began slowly to turn again.

What was it? Why did she not run out and throw her arms about him, as she used to do? She could not of course, now that she was grown up. It was not done. Even farm girls knew the rules of propriety.

Silok slowly walked up to her. She put down the mill handle, came toward him, and smiled sweetly, but with a shy, self-conscious restraint.

"Why, aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course," she said, rather too quickly. Then her voice was exuberant as she turned and called out, "Ma! Silok has returned!"

Then she said, "Just a second. I have only a bowl or two of rice left and shall be through."

Her brows knit as she went back to the mill. The hand mill was worked by a horizontal wooden handle, suspended by a rope from the ceiling. Silok stood silently while he watched the rocking movements of her body as her arms turned the mill. Her eyes kept looking at him sideways. Hers was a look of sadness and longing.

He knew then that he loved her and she loved him.

Later that afternoon, they had a chance to be together, sitting on the grass as they often had in childhood, near the Egret's Nest overlooking the valley lying below in the

afternoon sun. He began to inhale the fragrance of her face, and she said, "Please don't."

"Why? Please tell me why."

"Because we are both grown up."

"Nobody sees us."

"And because I shall never be your wife."

She said it in a rather matter-of-fact fashion.

She gave Silok a complete picture of their situation. She could not possibly leave the Egret's Nest and she never wanted to. He was preparing to go to Singapore for years, as she was told by his mother. Why would she not come to Changchow with him? That she certainly could not for that year. They were short-handed as it was. Who would look after Grandfather? He was almost completely blind now. He was absolutely dependent upon her. Her grandpa not only wanted her personal service; he unburdened to her all his thoughts as he would not to others. That alone was sufficient reason. Why did not her older brother, Tienchu, marry? It would be a great help to have another young woman in the house. Nobody knew why. Tienchu just would not marry. There was talk that a girl was being bespoken for, for Tienkay, her younger brother. She did not know what help that would be. From what she knew, the girl, named Chu-ah, was an "empty-head" eating much and doing little. She and Tienkay would make a perfect pair, just adding another mouth to help eat up the grain. Chu-ah was not without her charms. She was the daughter of a merry widow, and had learned from her mother flirtatious gestures and ways with men. Tienkay wanted her, and Juniper's own family was regarded as well-to-do in the

village, for they had a good farm. It was likely that they would be married the following fall. The thought horrified Juniper that another young woman, and she not of the right sort, should be moving about in the house.

Silok returned the following year and found her even prettier, but sad and resigned as usual. She was nineteen then and, according to custom, ready for marriage. There were changes in her home. They had spent three hundred dollars on the wedding of Tienkay. Although Chu-ah had come from a family poorer than themselves, she had the idea that she was marrying into riches. She should have pitched in to help on the farm, do things like watering the vegetables, tending the pigs, keeping the ducks, and a thousand other chores common to a farmstead. But she did not. For laundry, she washed only her own and Tienkay's things. For the first few months, they considered her a bride and excused her, and she was *very much* a bride. Soon it became apparent that she considered herself the *simpu* of the family—literally the daughter-in-law, but in reality the young mistress of a prosperous farm. Mrs. Loa was a pleasant, round-faced, sensible woman, and was ready to ignore many things. But she was no weak woman, and she asserted the mother-in-law's authority. What had been a peaceful, happy family was no more. Chu-ah's obvious claim to importance in the family lay in the fact that she would be the only one to produce a child and carry on the altar fire of the family. She acted as if that was all she meant to do. The mother-in-law and Juniper hated Tienkay's wife as only women could hate. But it got them nowhere. Chu-ah was taking it easy, and she was lazy and

sloppy in her appearance after the first months of marriage. Tienkay must have been disappointed to realize that the woman he had married was cold, slovenly, and not even affectionate. But she had firm breasts and fleshy hips, and he remained tied to her. The members of a family should work together of their own accord. When it was necessary for Mrs. Loa to tell Chu-ah to do this and do that all day, it became irritating all around. As for Juniper, it seemed so much easier to do things herself than wait for Chu-ah to do them. Then it became unbearable to see her idling and smiling and not offering to help while she was trying to finish and dry the laundry, as if she already had a baby to her credit and was otherwise occupied with the noble duties of motherhood. She actually announced and claimed several times that she was expecting, but Juniper and her mother became very cynical. Tienchu was out on the farm from early dawn till after sunset, went to bed early, and had not much to say about the home life.

The grandfather, now sightless, needed constant attention. It was beautiful to see the relation between Juniper and her grandfather, her "Akong," as she called him affectionately instead of the regular "Ankong." For her, it was one of the most perfect things in her life, that perfect harmony of spirit and affection. No matter how busy she was, Grandfather's needs came first. They were really able to live well, and had plenty of chickens and eggs, and Juniper took special pleasure in cooking for Grandpa and feeding him.

Their farm was short-handed. It almost looked as if it was ordained that Tienchu should work, Tienkay should eat, and the women were to keep house for them all. Tien-

kay suggested one day that they should hire help, and he mentioned Kamchia. Silok had known Kamchia at school, a boy with a pair of open round eyes, and a very honest, likable smile but unbelievably stupid in class. He could do addition only by counting his fingers, say, up to twenty. Since this was his method of counting, it was very difficult to add four to seven. He would not start by saying, eight, nine, ten, eleven, but crooked his fingers and started counting one to seven first. By the time he got to eleven, he did not know how many fingers he had crooked after seven. The other boys laughed and he did not take offense. He admired their brilliance and could not understand how they did it.

"Kamchia," said Silok. "Don't crook your fingers. Start counting from eight."

He crooked his fingers again. "One-two-three-four, etc." In other words, he could not understand the mystery of addition.

Silok and the other boys looked at him and he looked at them, with his frank, kindly eyes, and twitched his nose and smiled. One thing must be said for him: he was always happy. His mother had died when he was three, and his father loved him deeply, his only son. Now the father, too, had died. It was strange that such a simpleton was not bullied by everybody even though, by God, he was trying to do his best and had a smile for everybody. Physically, he was very strong. He was a good swimmer and had enormous shoulders. This was Kamchia—or Sugar Cane—whom Silok had known at school.

The village girls teased him, but were also fond of him.

He went about doing any odd jobs to help, without thought of pay. He was incapable of doing harm.

Juniper's family had hired Kamchia now, as a man to do everything, from the farm work to the simplest household chores. He was patient and good and only wanted board and lodging for himself.

That year when Silok arrived, Juniper greeted him in tears. It happened that everybody was away at the back, gathering the gleanings from the threshing floor. Juniper had come for something in the kitchen. She saw Silok coming through the fence and rushed forward to meet him. She held his hands, their eyes met, and tears came rolling down her face. Hand in hand they walked in, and then went to join the rest. It was true that her eyes were wet when the others came over. They were tears of happiness and she did not try to conceal them. Chu-ah then said something wicked: "See, Juniper is so happy she must have been dreaming about his return." The joke was out of place.

Frankly, Silok did not know what to do. He loved her so dearly, yet their lives were drifting apart. He knew he would soon be going abroad for his studies; it was expected of him. He would have to go to college and, when he graduated, she would be married to someone else. Curiously, he had a very definite sense that she would never leave the Egret's Nest.

The summer passed easily and they saw a great deal of each other. Kamchia was often around. He was not treated as a laborer, for there was that great democracy among farmers where each person's worth was daily tested by his work. Both Juniper and her mother liked Kamchia. When

he was around, everybody called on him, and he was immensely proud of his strength and happy to be of help. And if he looked at Juniper or did things for her, his admiration was so frank that one could not take offense. It was touching to see him pick up the wool ribbon dropped off her queue and hold it in his hand, staring and uncomprehending, as if it were a piece of Buddha's relic, and offer it to her.

One day, while the three of them were in the lichee grove she said, "I would love to see one of the egret's eggs. Would you get one for me?"

"Gladly." Lately Kamchia had been enormously useful in climbing the trees and shaking down the fruit during the lichee and lungyen season.

He was really going. The nest was at least fifty feet high, resting on shrubbery growing out of the rock fissures.

"Please don't," cried Juniper. "I want to see an egret's egg, but it is too dangerous."

He hardly heard her. The craggy surface could provide some footholds here and there, and there was thick shrubbery all along the fissures.

"Please don't," cried Juniper and Silok.

"It's all right," he called down.

He must have been glad of the opportunity. They looked up, holding their breath, as he went up and up. Something yielded, a branch cracked, but he went on. At the top, as he stretched his arm over the nest, a bird flew up with a frightening screech. He lurched back suddenly, then groped for an egg.

"One or two? There are three eggs there!" he hollered down.

"Just take one. Oh please be careful!"

He started to come down, clutching an egg in his hand.

"Don't do that," screamed Juniper. "Put that egg inside your shirt."

He did as he was told. That left his hands free again. He climbed down slowly, face toward the rock, his hands grasping at the surface and the twigs. All of a sudden, at about twenty feet from the ground, he slipped on some crumbling rocks, and he rolled down, stopped, and with a lightning speed leaped and landed on the ground.

They felt greatly relieved. He was immensely happy. "It's easy. No need to be scared," he said.

"Have you got it?" Juniper asked.

"Got what?"

"The egg."

"Oh, my, I must have crushed it."

He felt something wet on his stomach.

"I am so sorry, I am so sorry, Juniper."

"Never mind. I am glad you are safe."

"I am so sorry. But you wanted the egg."

"Never mind. I shouldn't have asked you."

He bared his shirt. The pit of his stomach was smeared yellow, and they all laughed.

The strange thing was that early the next morning, Kamchia presented her with an egg, whole and intact, as she came down to the kitchen.

"Look, see what I have got for you." He had that engaging, open smile.

"Thank you, Kamchia. But we mustn't do that again, or the egrets will go away."

CHAPTER 8

SEPTEMBER HAD COME around and Silok was due to go back to school. Juniper had neither encouraged him nor rejected him. One might have thought it was the strong fatalism in her peasant blood that made her resigned to a given situation.

When Silok was preparing to go back to Changchow, Juniper suddenly announced that she was accompanying him as far as Siokay, some ten miles away. Siokay was the river port where the riverboats left for Changchow. There was a merchant who had not paid up on a consignment of sugar cane the previous winter. It was complicated, but the gist of it was that a woman friend at Siokay had guaranteed payment for some dealer. Usually, it was a man's business, but Tienchu never attended to the business end. Juniper just said she would go. It all goes to show how her family needed her. If they started early, she could be back the same day, but with business to conduct, she expected to be back the following day. They were going on foot, but

Mrs. Loa said, "You must take a boat back, for I don't want a young girl to come back over the mountains alone."

She came down to Silok's house early, at seven, happy and excited as usual. She carried a small black cloth bag and a cane with many knobs, made of orange wood, which belonged to her grandfather. The "beat-dog-cane," so-called, was useful for warding off dogs when a traveler entered a village.

"How are you going?" asked Silok's sister. "Do you know the way?"

Pointing in the direction of the Stonepit in the northeast, Juniper said, "It's that way. Just follow the river. I can ask anybody on the way."

So they started. His sister and mother saw them to the door, seeing the two disappear around the corner, he carrying a small pigskin case, painted white and green, containing his clothing and she with her black cloth bag suspended from the cane perched on her shoulder.

Walking was easy for Juniper. In fact, Silok found her pace faster than his. They were in high spirits. The early September morning was not cold in that region. She had a lavender-lined jacket on and her hair was shining and smooth. Her bangs seemed to smile over her eyes. They had never felt so close, as if they had never been truly alone. Hawks circled in the air and before them stretched the open sky, with specks of fleecy clouds against the towering rocky range on the north. The air was brisk and invigorating, good for a hike. For the most part, they passed stretches of corn and, here and there, groves in resplendent autumn colors, surrounding hamlets with bluish white chimney smoke curling idly in the forenoon.

The more they walked, the better their spirits. Juniper

went along at a jaunty pace, her steps light and her hips swaying with the motion.

"At this rate, we shall be in Siokay before noon," she said, exuberant in spirit.

"You are not in a hurry, are you?"

"No, why should I be?"

At this point, the road crossed over from the right of the river to the left. Here the water sang over the rapids, over round, slippery pebbles, for it had rained a great deal that summer, and the steppingstones were submerged. They took off their shoes and socks and waded through the water. Reaching the other side, Juniper threw down her cane and opened the black bag. She took out some sesame cakes and said, "I am terribly hungry. Let's eat something."

They found a spot and sat on a big boulder, her trousers rolled up and her feet still bare. The day was getting warm. After some food, Juniper walked down the pebbly beach. She called to him and said, "Come on down."

She held out her hand for him and, when he came near, grabbed it. Her face was shining in the resplendent sun, her feet were brown. A breeze from the mountains overhead blew her hair about and the babbling water drowned her laughter.

"Come on, let's play ducks and drakes, and see who is better. Remember we used to do this as children?"

They played at it time and again, sending the flat pebbles skipping over the water surface. A piece from a curving tile would be best.

"I can't find any really flat piece. And the surface moves too much to make a *hu*," Juniper said.

"*Hu*" was their childhood special language, meaning a

piece which flew, ricocheting over the water to the opposite bank in light tripping motions. The use of the word recalled to Silok a world of childhood memories. It was as if suddenly everything was changed and they were children once more.

"Don't move. Let me look at you!" Silok suddenly said.

She turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder. It seemed at that moment that the whole world was centered around her, the sun casting a white ripple over her hair, and she in her rolled-up trousers standing on the beach.

She blushed and in the same instant said to him, "Come on. There may be some crayfish here."

She went forward, unconcerned, and waded along the shore. Soon Silok joined her, looking for small minnows and crayfish. A few were ducking in and out through the sand and stones. Juniper cupped her hands over one. "I've got it," she whispered. He quickly cupped his hands over hers and whispered, "Do you think we've got it?"

Slowly her hands closed over the sand, and found that the little creature had escaped. Their faces were close together and her hands were still in his.

For a moment, they looked into each other's eyes. Silok captured her hands and said, very warmly and naturally, "I wish it could always be like this, you and I against the world."

She dropped her hands. "You know it can never be." She said this with a heavy sigh.

"Why not, if you are willing to wait?"

"I am nineteen, and you'll be gone for I don't know how many years."

"Look here. I have talked this over with my mother and sister. If we are engaged, you can even come over to my house while I am away."

"Must you go abroad? Why must you go abroad?"

"I must."

"And I am nineteen and you will be gone for years. What am I supposed to do?"

Impulsively Silok touched her hair with his hand, caressing it, and looking into her eyes he drew her face toward him. She seemed to dread it, hesitated a second, and then yielded to his light, fugitive kiss. She blushed and remained silent. A moment ago, her yeomanlike good sense had overcome her inner feelings, but now she was soft and supple. The kiss had shocked her and her face was troubled.

"Aren't you happy with me?" he asked.

"Yes. I wish it could always be like this. You and me and my farm."

"Your farm. Is it so important to you?"

"Yes. It's not the farm, but my family. You don't understand . . ."

The moment of perfect bliss had passed and something like a shadow had passed over them.

Going back up the beach, she said, "Silok, I love you and shall always love you, but I don't think I can marry you."

A new understanding had come between them, now that they had confessed to each other their real feelings. Reaching the mountain path, Silok raised his head and saw the sun striking the dogtoothed outline of the Stonepit, where there was a giant pass at the top, a deep, yawning gap between perpendicular cliffs, looking like the hole left by a

lost tooth. Near-by, a green and purple mountainside closed in on them.

Juniper was sitting on the grass putting on her socks and shoes. "What are you looking at?" she asked, as she saw him standing there transfixed.

"I was thinking how wonderful it would be if we could one day visit that Stonepit together. I would see you standing on the top in the middle of the pass, looking down at me and calling me to you. I would forget the world for that moment and follow you. You and the mountains."

"I am here, and the mountains are here." She had stood up. "What do you want?" Her bell-like voice was lost on the mountain path, mingled with the bird cries.

The rest of the way, they jogged on together, so happy that they were unaware of the miles they had put behind them. There was no more shyness about her, her arm was about his waist most of the time. At times they had to go up and down around a hill. Her pace quickened rather than slowed down. Sometimes she skipped two steps in one as she went up and down.

At one point, she said to him, "Is there a more beautiful valley than ours in this world? You'll have these mountains and you'll have me. Why must you go abroad?" Silok was silent, and she continued, "Even if you were to live at Changchow, we have bananas and sugar cane and pomelos and pears and oranges. And all kinds of fish and vegetables. What is there in a foreign port that we haven't got here?"

Silok told her that there were many things in the Western world, the foreign countries; that he must go to college and learn, that his father had expected it of him.

"What will you learn by seeing foreign countries?"

"I don't know."

"And you think you can be happy, as happy as we are here?"

"I don't know."

She tossed her head, an injured expression on her face.

"All right, then, you go. I bet you will be unhappy. And I don't think you can come back to me because I will be married already."

She seemed to be making a fight for him to stay at home, but she was only stating her plain opinions. Because of the note of certainty and confidence, and even of challenge, he always remembered these words.

That day and the following day, they were always together. Silok hired a place for himself in a riverboat which was not to leave till the next day and also found a small skiff in which Juniper could go back, so that, as her mother had insisted, she would not have to make the journey afoot alone. Silok proposed to spend the night in the boat, but she protested, saying that they would be loading and unloading and there would be no place for them, since the planks would not be laid until the loading was completed.

"Come on, we want to be alone," she said.

"But where? At an inn?"

"No, I don't like those filthy inns. Why do we need to go anywhere? There must be places up on the hillsides, where we won't have to pay a penny for the night."

Siokay was a small town, where two wide but shallow rivers converged. There was a wooden bridge; on one side were the streets and on the other, on a lower level, the houses spread out into the countryside.

After a bowl of noodles and some wheat cakes, they crossed the bridge. It was still light, and they must have walked half an hour until they saw a small temple with a pinkish wall at the top of a small hill. They went up toward it and, on reaching the top, found that it was nothing but the skeleton of a burnt-down temple. Charred beams lay on the floor, and overhead the roof was gaping, and the walls were blackened and bare. A pair of burnt-out candles still stood in an earthen container. A few clay buddhas, one with a broken head, added to the aspect of desolation and disrepair.

"What a place!" remarked Juniper.

They came out again and chose a dry spot, laid down their things and sat down.

"Well, here it is!" she said. "Have you ever spent a night in the open? I have."

They huddled there, with knees pressed against their chests, and surveyed the town below. Gradually the sky darkened. Glimmering lights from the boats decked the banks, while their dark hazy forms stood out against the pale silver of the water. Once in a while, they saw people, torches in their hands, passing over the wooden bridge.

They gradually slid down to a lying position. Overhead stars began to appear in the quickly enveloping darkness. Across were the distant hills, while before them a pale moon was already sinking toward the horizon. Juniper was tired, but happy.

"Oh, there is the Celestial Hound with her twinkling eyes, just above us, to the south. And there is the Bushel"—she pointed to the Dipper—"to the north. Tienkay and I used to count the stars on a clear night as they started to

appear, but they were lit so fast one after another that we had to give up."

Silok's heart was heavy as he lay on the slope, with the boatmen's lights spread below him. Every shooting star was like an arrow which made his heart quiver and stripped him bare of every thought except of the girl beside him. She had sat up now and was looking at him. Overhead, myriads of stars in clusters broke into view, mocking them, and the shooting stars slashed across the skies like lines of fire scorching his soul.

"Why are you so silent?" she asked.

"Just thinking—about everything—about ourselves and my future."

"Then tell me. There may not be another such night, just you and I alone."

Silok began to tell her about how, after his graduation from school that year, he was going to Singapore. He told her about his going into medicine and about world geography, the five continents and two big oceans of the world. She listened attentively and kept on saying, "I don't understand."

"May I tell you something?" she said. "I planned this trip really because I wanted to send you off, and because I wanted to have a whole day together so that we could have a real talk. You are going away and I do not know when I may see you again—you are coming back this winter, of course, I hope. And you will become a fine doctor, a great doctor, and forget all about me."

"Don't say that. Forget you? It is impossible."

"You never can tell. Those foreign girls. One of them

will get you, and you may not even want to come back home to us."

"Don't be so sad, Juniper."

"I want to talk. I must talk. If you are not coming back to see your mother this winter, you must let your mother know and she will tell me and I will find some excuse or other to see you in Changchow."

"What about you?"

"Oh, I will marry."

"Who?"

"Don't know. Not yet. My grandpa needs me. If I didn't care for Grandpa and for my family, I would marry and leave them. But I do. If I could leave Grandpa and forget the family, I would ask you to marry me and take me to Singapore with you."

"Why can't you?"

"Because."

They talked of other things. Then she started to say she was feeling sleepy and they had better sleep. After all, they had had a busy day. She slid into a lying position next to him, and before she closed her eyes, she said quite innocently, "I have never spent a night like this with a man before."

"Nor have I."

"Then be a good boy and sleep."

She turned on her side and soon fell asleep from fatigue. Then she turned in her sleep toward him, and Silok lay awake and held her hand in his. Soon he, too, fell asleep.

After a while Silok was awakened by her. "Get up. It is getting damp. Let's go inside the temple."

Silok rubbed his eyes and found the ground was indeed damp.

"We don't want to catch cold," she said.

They picked up their things and went inside. The night was chilly from the wind that swept through the river valley. The moon had already gone down, and the night was still.

However, as their eyes became adjusted, they could see the dim starlight coming through the gaping holes in the roof. Otherwise, they lay submerged in the darkness of the night.

"I am all awake now," said Silok.

"So am I. Hold me close. I am cold."

They lay in the dark, their arms about each other, and Silok ran his arm around her back, and she snuggled closer and said, "It is so good like this." And he caressed her hair, and she lay still, and their breath kept each other warm. Out of the darkness appeared a woman, not the Juniper of the Egret's Nest, but another, soft and weak and warm, for he touched something wet and warm as he brushed her cheek. She did not say a word but stayed there, weak and silent and cozy against his breast.

"I wish it were always like this," she said finally.

Then a hot flood of passion seized him, and he asked, "Do you know those things?"

"What things?"

"You know. Those things."

"Don't be silly. A girl knows those things as soon as she is grown up."

"Why won't you marry me?"

She broke down, crying and sobbing. And she said, "It

is so strange. I have never held a man so close like this before. I cannot hold Grandpa like this, nor my mother. But with you, it is so good."

Once she broke down, she began to tell him many things that were in her heart. She told all about her troubles at home, about Chu-ah and how she and her mother hated her, and about Tienkay. "Once Grandpa told me this. I am his favorite since I came into this world. Grandpa said, 'I am a tree, I have two branches. Tienchiu is good and dutiful, but he is barren. I have another branch, and that branch is rotten. It is the type that will end up selling my farm, and I cannot do anything about it.' " She continued, "You see me happy and gay all day. I am too busy all day to think of these things. But at night, I often lie awake thinking. What can I do? You see now why I cannot marry and leave everything."

She really broke down, and he comforted her, and then she felt better.

"It's so good to have someone to talk to. Hold me closer please."

She was calm then and sat up to blow her nose. Then she held his hand and said with a sudden sprightliness, "Do you want to do it?"

"I do. Do you?"

"I am asking about you."

Then she gave herself to him entirely. Soon they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Later he said to her, "I am sorry I did this to you."

She replied, "Do not feel sorry. I would rather lose my virginity to you than to anybody else. This I do because I love you, that you may remember me always."

The next day they went about hand in hand in the streets and shops and on the river bank, blissfully happy with a new sense of belonging together, sharpened by the imminent separation and a sense of uncertainty about the future.

They had said farewell to each other at Siokay, he going on to Changchow, and she returning home alone.

He heard no news from home, although he wrote to his mother and sent regards to Juniper's family. In December he received news from Bekum, who was now teaching at Kulangsu, that Juniper had married Kamchia. He was stunned. She said Kamchia had married into the Loa family, had become a *chiokiasai*, in their dialect. This happened when a girl of a well-to-do family, for some important reasons, wanted to remain in her family. The *chiokiasai* was to take the family name of the girl's family. But it had been so sudden and unexpected. Silok thought, and later confirmed from Juniper herself, that it was the consequence of their night together. Bekum said it was the grandfather's idea to *chiokiasai*, but Silok knew that Juniper must have given him the idea. She had no choice.

CHAPTER 9

IT WAS A MONTH before Silok could leave his job to go home to see his mother. He dreamed of seeing Juniper again, whom he had not seen for two years. With some reluctance, his office had given him two months' leave on the grounds of his mother's critical illness. He would need almost a month just for the voyage alone.

Also something had happened which complicated his departure. He was not exactly in a holiday mood.

One day at three o'clock, Weysen rang up to say that he must see him.

"Alice Oe is dead."

"What?"

"Committed suicide. I got the news from the office. Can I see you now?"

Silok said that he was afraid he could not, but would see him as soon as work was over.

"I'll be downstairs waiting for you at five," said Weysen. "The story will be out in the afternoon papers."

Silok was considerably shaken. He had seen her only about three weeks earlier. He recalled her voice, her smiles.

Weysen was already waiting downstairs at the entrance to his office. As he met him, his friend looked up sharply.

"Seen this?" Weysen said, pointing to an evening paper in his hand.

Silok took the paper from him. His brows knit as he glanced at the headline. It said in big letters: "Millionaire Heiress Committed Suicide. Frustrated in Love."

His blood curdled and his lips were parched. The paper did not give many details. She had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. The maid had discovered her body at eleven o'clock, as she usually slept late. She had left no note. Mrs. Oe refused to see the press.

A story like this made the front page, as the Oes were a socially prominent family. There was no mention of Silok's name. An unidentified source was quoted as saying that the girl had been moody and had kept to her room for several days. The motive for her suicide was largely a matter of conjecture and speculation by a public hungry for romantic stories. Undoubtedly she had many boy friends who came to her house, or who went out driving with her. Silok had never taken her out.

Tragedy had never hit him so close before.

"Well?" asked Weysen.

"I can't understand. I haven't seen her for almost a month."

They were standing in the shaded corridor.

"Come on. Let's go somewhere. We want a talk."

They crossed two streets to the south, passed through the narrow Change Alley, and came out on a broad street.

There had been a downpour for about an hour and steam rose from the hot pavement, mixed with the odor of gasoline and the briny tang of the sea.

They turned into a café on the left. The room was darkened by the rattan shutter which had been pulled halfway up. Through the holes in the woven rattan one could see the whitish sea, boats going out to the Indonesian islands, and tugboats plying the harbor to and fro.

The two friends slid into a window seat whose red imitation leather cover was cracked and showed signs of long service. A ceiling fan was churning overhead.

Weysen called for two whiskies.

"That's right. I need a stiff drink."

Silok slouched in the corner seat. Weysen, who sat with his back to the window, ran his fingers through his hair and looked at Silok's sharp profile in the mellow light.

"There may be more details tomorrow. It will set every tongue in Singapore wagging. You must tell me everything. She was in love with you. It couldn't be for any other man, I don't believe. I may be able to help and cover up for you."

"There is no need. Frankly, I didn't do a thing. My uncle will not talk. He will be disappointed, I am sure. Alice was a sweet girl. I don't think she was ever happy, with such a mother and such a father. She must have wanted to escape. She was different from her mother. She knew she was homely-looking, and she was modest. I mean she wasn't a snob—just a plain-thinking, plain-living girl. Money couldn't mean anything to a girl like Alice. You know she said to me one day, 'I wish I could go to an island and be married to a fisherman, who would be good

and kind and considerate to me, of course. None of my mother's diamond-studded false teeth.' "

"It's a pity," said Weysen. "That's what I sometimes can't figure out. Good shoots from bad bamboos, and bad shoots from good bamboos. When did you see her last?"

"I can't remember. Must have been about three weeks ago. About two weeks ago, she called me up and said her mother was going out, and she would like to see me."

"And?"

"I didn't go. I excused myself. You see, I didn't want to encourage her."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

Silok took a taxi and went home, burdened with a sense of guilt. He had not killed her but knew that he had been the indirect cause of her death. If he had been willing to follow up the romance, she wouldn't have taken her own life.

Really he could have come to like her and perhaps marry her, except for the mother-in-law and what she stood for.

Confucius had once preferred the vulgarians to the snobs. Alice's "fisherman" would be a "vulgarian" and not a snob.

If there was one thing he hated most, and his father had hated most . . . No, it was impossible. He could not have married into her circle.

These thoughts occupied him on his way home. Before he knew it, the taxi had drawn up before his house.

The uncle was sitting on the terrace. A glass of sherry

stood on a cane table near-by. When Silok was halfway up the stairs, he called out, "Silok, come here."

He was evidently in a bad mood.

"Alice Oe is dead," the uncle said without looking up.

"So I saw from the papers."

His voice was quick and sharp as he turned to him.

"What has been going on between you two?"

"Why, nothing."

The old man pointed to a small evening paper. Silok quickly glanced at it. His own name was mentioned. "It is surmised"—"Rumor has it . . ."—"A reliable source reveals . . ."

Silok threw the paper down.

"It is a tabloid. You can't stop people from 'surmising,' 'believing,' and hearing 'rumors.' Nothing more than that. We can't do anything about it."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I hardly saw her the last few weeks."

"No quarrels?"

"How could I quarrel when I didn't see her?"

"Nothing during the month of my absence?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Then why should the girl take her own life?"

"I wouldn't know."

The uncle remained silent, and Silok turned to go, seeing in his uncle's face the expression of a fisherman who could not get over the thought of a big fish that had got away, angry with himself.

Silok waited for an opportunity to talk with Juana.

The uncle did not mention the subject again but sat, glum, through dinner. After dinner, he asked the chauffeur

feur to get the car ready and said he wanted to go out and see some friends.

Juana and Silok were sitting on the edge of the terrace. The heat had been so great that the lawn was dry in spite of the afternoon shower. A clear moon hung directly over the coconut palms, and in the shadow of the moonlit night, a few women and children were picking small shells and clams from the sand bars, now exposed since it was low tide.

"I can't understand why Alice should take her own life," Silok said.

Juana was silent. She looked at him from the corners of her eyes.

"It is a pity," she said slowly. "Such a young girl! I told you it would break her heart when you dropped her. Never thought she would take such a short view of things. You don't have to blame yourself for it."

Silok kept staring at the dark figures on the beach.

"Before you came home, your uncle was asking if you had been carrying on with Alice. He was so afraid you had got her pregnant or got otherwise deeply involved. I told him the truth, that during his absence you had gone to her home once or twice only, at most. Now that this has happened, he seemed relieved. When was it that you saw her last?"

"It must have been about three weeks ago. It was a Sunday, I remember. We had a game of doubles with two other boys. The following Sunday, she called me again, but I said I couldn't go. Had not heard from her since. Alice died this morning. This is Wednesday. So you figure that out. It must have been ten days ago that she called last."

She took his hand, which was lying on the table, and made as if to say something. Finally, she said, "Silok, remember you asked me to help you? You and Hamsun have decided to marry each other."

"That is what I am planning."

"You said you would never marry Alice."

"Correct."

"Then you don't have to blame yourself. I have not made a mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"I must tell you. Only you and I need know. Alice called for you last Saturday night, when you were out. I took the phone. She asked who you were out with. I said, 'With a girl friend.' She insisted on knowing the girl's name, and if it was anybody she knew."

"Did you tell her?"

"No. She became frantic, and said she had thought I was her friend and insisted on knowing the truth. The thought came to me that it was time she stopped deceiving herself. And I said, 'If you must know, it is a girl to whom he is secretly engaged.' I couldn't hear what she said, she stuttered and lisped so that I couldn't make it out. She may have broken down—I don't know. Anyway, there was a dead silence at the other end of the line, and I hung up. I never thought it would come to this . . ."

"Did she call again?"

"No. That was all. Nobody wanted it this way. I am telling you everything, because I want to . . . because now we are so close to each other . . . You are not angry with me?"

"No. Someone had to tell her. Only I wish she had been able to take it."

"I am glad you see the point. My Silok, I want us to have a perfect understanding with each other always. That is why I wanted to tell you. I was trying to help you . . ."

"Juana, I am glad that you told me. Life is complicated, isn't it?"

"I think we'd better go in. If there's gossip in the papers, let them," said the young woman as she rose.

"Right." ~ ~

When the time for his departure approached, Silok telegraphed his sister to let her know the date. He went to see Aunt Siu-eng, and arranged to meet Hamsun, saying that he would be back in about two months and he would be writing to her constantly. When he got back, he would speak to his uncle about the engagement.

He sought out Weysen. He asked him to drop in and see Hamsun once in a while, and see if she needed any help. There was to be no secret between them. They were sitting in a café the afternoon before the departure.

"Are you really crazy?"

"Yes. We are as good as engaged. It is so good to feel that you are loved by a woman . . . When are you going to get married?"

"Not me."

"That is because you have not met the right woman."

"You have not spoken to your uncle yet?"

"No. Only Juana knows and you know. I have already been to her home and seen her mother."

"And you don't mind marrying a mermaid's daughter?"

"Why should I? I am sure I love her very much. That is all that counts, isn't it?"

Weysen scratched the tip of his nose with his index finger. "Then I won't say anything."

"Come on, say it."

"She has a child by Lakjio. Was kept by him—for how long, I don't know."

"I know. She told me."

"If you know, then it is all right."

"I tell you what. We've already had a quarrel. I went into the milk bar one late afternoon. There were only two or three customers left. She was sitting at a table with an English boy, Jimmy, whom I had seen a few times before. I said, 'Hello!' to her and she said, 'Hello!' to me and went on talking to Jimmy. I didn't mind. That meant nothing to me because I know she only loves me and nobody else. I went over to talk with Nina, who was standing idle behind the counter. I forget what we were talking about. It was some silly joke and she laughed and I laughed and she kept howling until tears came to her eyes. All of a sudden, Hamsun came and said sharply to Nina, 'Attend to your business. He is mine.' She grabbed me and walked away. Nina pouted and didn't answer back. When I turned around, I saw the Englishman had gone.

"Later we went out together, and I said to her, 'You are jealous.'

"'Of course,' she said. 'I will let no one steal you from me.' I felt very good, and I said to her, 'I saw you talking and laughing with Jimmy. So I have no right to be jealous, and you have, is that it?' She said, 'Not the way you and Nina were carrying on. I saw her slapping your hand.' We made up and kissed. Really it was my fault to make a fuss about it. I know she cares for no one but me."

Weysen was looking at him through his half-closed

lashes, his head tilted back, a wet cigarette hanging from his lower lip.

"Of course, it is true," Silok continued. "Jealousy makes one blind. It is a great experience to feel this love, to want to possess her, all of her."

"You are going to see Juniper soon."

"Don't mention Juniper in the same breath. It is something so different. You wouldn't understand."

"No?"

"I bet you, you have never been in love."

"You think so?"

"Don't look at me like that."

"I wish I could be as romantically childish as you are, but I am afraid I cannot. Ah, well! See you tomorrow. I'll come round to your house early, to help. Is Hamsun coming to see you off?"

"She told me she would be at the wharf."

When the boat was getting ready to leave, Weyson, the uncle, Juana, and Aunt Siu-eng were all there. Hamsun was standing there too, waving good-by with the rest.

The boat finally moved off slowly. There was the usual crowding around the railing, two or three deep, the usual smiling and crying and waving of hands.

Hamsun was wearing a cute green dress and red scarf.

"Who is she?" asked the uncle.

"She is the girl your nephew is very fond of. I will introduce her," answered Juana.

"This is Silok's uncle. This is Miss Hamsun, our Silok's friend. She has been to our house."

The uncle uttered a simple, "Ah," surveyed her from head to foot, and slowly walked away.

CHAPTER 10

"AH-HAH! SILOK!" was the cheerful greeting he received when Juniper saw him coming inside the fence and rushed to greet him.

They stood for a second surveying each other. All the time, Juniper could not conceal the joy on her face.

They walked into the house together, but Juniper soon ran ahead, shouting, "Auntie, Auntie, your son is here!" He had not known that his mother was living at the Egret's Nest until he went to his own house.

He had felt something overpowering the minute he wended his way up the familiar hill path. The clean, cool air, the familiar outline of things, even the smell of the wind among the trees, the sight of the cottage, and now Juniper herself—all made him feel like a tired traveler coming home. Once more he was the boy he had always been at heart. He felt restored. He was incredibly, deliriously happy.

"Mother!" he cried as he went up to her and knelt by her bedside.

His mother moved a hand and placed it over his bent head, as if he were a baby, and said with a voice of trembling triumph, "Silok, you are home." She did not cry, but Silok raised his head and saw her narrow her eyes to examine him as if she would have known if he had lost one hair on his head. Her face was wrinkled, for she had been ill, but it was a strong, confident face. The brief look satisfied her that he was intact, one piece, unharmed.

Her voice had always been weak and soft. She saw Juniper standing by and said to him, "Silok, Juniper has been looking after me while you were away. She has been better than a daughter to me."

"And where is Bekum?"

"She is with her husband at Soasia. She was able to come and visit me with her baby last May."

"Is she happy?"

"Yes. The baby is adorable, and her husband adores her, as you know."

Silok was silent for a moment. Bekum had given him the most perfect sisterly love a boy could have. His mother, Bekum, and Juniper were the three people he cared for most, or perhaps it would be more correct to say they were the three who had given him most of what he had and what he was.

After a while, he said, "Oh . . . Bekum. I must see her. I didn't stop at Soasia because I wanted to see you first. We must send for her . . . or I will go myself. I haven't seen her since she was married. I know I will be able to bring her. Oh, Mother, if we could all be together—you, Bekum, and

Juniper—wouldn't it be wonderful? I wouldn't want ever to go abroad again."

The conversation was interrupted by a child crying: "Mama." Juniper turned and said, "Oh, you, where have you been?"

"I've been . . . I've been . . . that way." He pointed with his chubby hand toward the back.

"Come on, remember Uncle Silok?" Juniper said.

She led the child forward and pushed him toward Silok, and said, "Call Uncle," and then stood watching. Silok saw that her eyes were shining.

"Uncle," Bong-ah said.

In the country, it was the custom to give children most unassuming names, sometimes even humiliating names. Bong-ah means can do. A little humiliating, perhaps, but it was a darling name, not pretentious like boys' names such as Pillar of Court and Grandpa's Hope.

Silok's mother said, "This one is the most intelligent child ever born into this world. Wait till his mother tells you all the things he says and does."

Silok looked back. Juniper had averted her face and walked out of the room.

"Where you come from?" the child asked the new guest.

"*Ke-hoan*. From abroad."

"What do you do that for?"

"To study."

"Coming home? And never *ke-hoan* again?"

"I don't know."

"Will you come and help me catch grasshoppers?"

Silok felt as if he were living that life all over again.

"Not just now."

"But you will? There are such big grasshoppers. And yesterday Mother gave me a golden scarab. Shall I show it to you?"

Without waiting for an answer, he dashed out and soon came back with a beetle tied with a red thread. Its back had a metallic shine of green and purple.

Juniper came back now and held a cup of tea for him. She smiled to see the child nestling close to Silok's knees.

"Welcome home," she said simply. Then she pulled a low stool and seated herself. Silok was sitting on a brown, creaking rattan chair. The light came into that dark room through a small high window.

It was like the good old days when they were children. She said, "You have not forgotten me and your mother these years? Your mother and I were so happy to receive your letter saying you were coming back. I can't imagine what you do, what you see abroad." She looked at him and said, "You haven't changed."

"Nor have you."

Silok felt a kind of overflowing happiness at being there, his mother on one side, Juniper on the other, a state of happiness so perfect that he enjoyed sitting there and saying nothing. How could there be such a marvelous creature as Juniper?

"Where are Tienkay and his wife?"

Juniper replied reluctantly. "They have gone to live in Changchow. She was so unhappy here."

"And Tienchu?"

"He is at Siokay for treatment. He suffers from a hardened spleen as a result of an attack of malaria. He feels

easily tired. His skin is yellow, and I ask him not to do too much. It's me and Kamchia now."

"Kamchia has been good?"

"Very good."

"Oh, you didn't tell me how Grandpa passed away."

"He is buried there, side by side with Father. I will take you there when I can get away."

Silok remembered that when he had left for Singapore, two years before, the grandfather's hair was all white and he was totally blind.

"Wonderful Granddad," he said.

"Yes, wonderful Granddad. Was eighty-three when he died." There was tenderness in her voice, a kind of grateful tenderness, without a trace of sorrow. "Two days before he died, Grandpa said to me, 'Juniper, is Chu-ah around?' I said, 'No,' and Grandpa said, 'I am going to pass away soon. My feet are getting heavy. The numbness is coming up from there. When I go away, you and your mama will carry on. Chu-ah is totally useless.' And I said, 'Grandpa, I know. She is no good, no good for us Loas.' And he said, 'Bury me with your papa. That upper end, a little to the right. I like it that way.' And I said, 'Akong, you'll still be around.' And he said, 'I will be around with you all, and don't you or your mama do anything that I do not approve, for I shall know.' Then he patted my hand twice. I didn't cry, I tell you I didn't cry. And I said to him, 'Akong, you can count on me.' I saw a tear in his eyes and I said, 'Shame on you! Are you crying, Akong?' And he said, 'No. I am just feeling so happy.' Two days later, we found him dead in his chair."

"You must have wept terribly at the funeral."

"Of course I did. He was such a good, upright man. I am proud of being his granddaughter and I mean to carry on. You know that Poe-ah who used to steal ducks from us and whom Akong once beat up terribly? Well, Poe-ah came to the funeral and shed tears too. And I don't feel I can do anything that Akong would disapprove. I would hear his voice saying, Juniper, don't do it. Yes, I really hear his voice."

And she said to him, "Akong loved you too. If you hadn't gone away . . ." She left the sentence unfinished.

Silok could see Grandpa sitting in his old rattan chair, brown and smooth with age, one hand resting on the bamboo armrest, the other waving slowly and leisurely a fan of bleached palm leaf. Though he could not see, his teeth were intact and he had a good digestion. He was really resting, in his old age, after a lifetime of hard work and honest living. Silok remembered the slow fan movements and the soft chuckle seeming to come right out of his white beard, while he looked up with sightless eyes.

"Tell me how you learned to write," Silok said. "I was so tickled when I got your letter."

Juniper's eyes glistened and she said with an enthusiastic laugh, "Oh, how was it? I knew you would be surprised."

"How did you learn!"

"Remember your old teacher Tsan Sian-si? One day I said to myself, I am going to learn. I have to. At least I must be able to read the bills and sign my name, so that I won't be fooled by anybody. I couldn't learn it from Kamchia. Whatever he had learned, he had given it all back to the teacher. So I got Tsan Sian-si up here and told him to give

me lessons, and I paid him. I started with the rhyme *Jinchitsaw*. He made me recite it."

"It wouldn't be difficult for you, I know."

"I found it a lot of fun."

She wanted to show off and started to recite the first lines:

Beginning of man.

Human nature is good.

All natures are alike.

Habits make men different, etc.

She was going on with her nimble tongue and voice and would have covered the highlights of China's history, but Silok said, "Marvelous. I knew you would be a good student if you could go to school."

"Well, once I started, I got interested. Then I thought, Why don't I let Bong-ah learn it too, when the teacher comes up? Then Bong-ah learned so fast that I found I had to keep ahead of him all the time in order to teach him. I know about five hundred characters now," she said proudly. "It's the writing that is difficult. My wrist feels so sore after a while. It is worse than embroidery."

Suddenly a wonderful light came into her eyes, and she said, "I have something to show you." She turned her head and called aloud for Bong-ah.

"Bong-ah, come here and bring your book with you." Turning to Silok, she said, "You will be amazed!"

A moment later, the six-year-old came into the room, his big, round eyes full of a sharp curiosity. Juniper drew him to her on the low stool, and with great pride flipped the pages of the *Chienjibun*, rhymed but in archaic Chinese. Character by character, she pointed with her finger and asked, "What is this?" and, "What is this?"

"He learns a character by seeing it only once and remembers it and never makes a mistake," Juniper told Silok. "I have a hard time keeping ahead of him. The teacher said he had never seen a boy learn as fast as this one. I am half-way through, and he is catching up to me. The teacher is amazed. Everyone is amazed. Grandauntie is amazed. Isn't he amazing?"

Silok had never seen a happier sight in his life than the pride and the joy and the satisfaction on Juniper's face.

"You are amazing yourself," he said. "Teaching yourself to teach the child."

"There's a child for quick learning if there ever was one," she said.

"How many characters does he know now?"

"About two hundred, and I only know slightly over five hundred. By the time we come to the end of the book, we'll be running neck and neck, I tell you." The *Chienjibun* contained exactly one thousand different characters, each occurring only once.

She pushed the boy to him and said, "Go on. You test him."

The boy had a finger in his mouth. He stared at Silok and, with a big smile, ran away.

"Where is your baby?" Silok asked a little later.

"She is asleep. I won't wake her now. But where's your luggage?" asked Juniper.

"Down at the house."

"You are coming up to stay with your mother, aren't you?"

Silok said of course he came back to be with his mother.

"Then I'll have the luggage sent for. It's awfully hot below at this time of the year, and Auntie likes it up here. Isn't that so?" She turned to Silok's mother.

"I sleep much better up here," she said to her son. "Of course we must not permanently impose upon Juniper's mother. I'll go down when it gets cooler. And I have Bong-ah to keep me company here. Silok, your mother has been terribly lonely since your father passed away and your sister married off. Juniper came to see me every two or three days, brought me fruit, vegetables. Your mother is getting old. I cough a great deal at night and lie awake and have no one to talk to. Up here, she brings me a pot of hot tea the first thing when she wakes up. It helps my cough. She did shopping for me when she went down. I actually got to look forward to her coming. Last June 27"—Silok's mother always remembered things by dates—"last June 27, she said to me, 'Silok will be returning soon. Why don't you come up and live with us, Auntie?' I have really slept much better since I came up. She said that I must really look well when you came home, and you could stay here, too, when you came."

"You really said that?" he asked Juniper.

"I did. We have trees. I know you love the trees. So I thought it all up. Auntie and I were counting the days till your return."

Silok was oppressed by a great sense of debt. "Juniper, I don't know how to thank you, taking care of my mother while I was away. I did not know all this."

"But she is my auntie. Don't forget that. You fool, why did you have to go abroad, as if you didn't have a mother at home?"

When the luggage arrived, Juniper was killing a chicken and plucking it. She wiped her bloody hands and came in to look. The luggage was taken into the central room and left on the untiled floor. The mother was so happy over her son's return that she had got up and dressed and combed her hair as if she were entertaining a guest. She sat in an old black wooden chair while he unpacked.

Silok took out three gifts: one for his mother, one for Juniper, and one for her mother. First he gave his mother a heavy gold ring, and then a small globe filled with dimes, and he said, "Here, Mother, I promised you when I was a child that I would bring you a world of dimes, and here it is, a world of dimes." He jingled it happily.

The mother's face creased contentedly. Then he slipped the ring on his mother's gnarled finger and kissed it. Then he unwrapped another package, revealing a tiny pale jade Buddha in a case, and gave it to Juniper's mother.

"Come, Juniper," he said. "Close your eyes and give me your hand." She held out her hand and felt something cool and hard going up her wrist.

"Now open your eyes."

Juniper saw a jade bracelet, and her heart leaped to her mouth. It was such a surprise. The bracelet was a pale gray with streaks of green, and was not too expensive, but in that village it was something a woman would be proud of for life. Then Juniper's heart was filled with happiness, and she asked, "Can I really wear it and it won't break?"

"You can if you are careful."

"I am afraid I might break it. I do so much work. Wait

till Kamchia sees this. I don't know if he will want me to wear it."

The child was standing by his mother, looking with his big round eyes, and Juniper held him back. Then her heart stirred as she saw Silok opening something bulky. It was a toy clay stove and a tea set—a teapot and cups—which he had picked up at Changchow.

"Now, Bong-ah," he said, extending the box to him, "this is for you."

Then Juniper let go of the child, and the latter ran forward and took it shyly, as if something tremendous had happened to him. He looked at the set as if he were going to eat it up and then, overcoming his shyness, stretched out his arms toward Silok and embraced him tightly.

"Thank Uncle," said Juniper.

"Thank you, Uncle," said the child.

The ritual was over. Silok noticed on the high teak table two red candles lighted before a small wooden Buddha. A clay incense burner stood in the center, with a lot of burnt-out joss sticks.

"What are those lighted candles for?" he asked.

"To thank the Pawsat," answered Juniper, referring to a bodhisattva. "Since you left Singapore last month, your mother and I have prayed daily for your safe voyage. The last day of the fair, I bought those red candles. We want to celebrate tonight."

"I just lighted them," said the mother, "and have thanked the Pawsat already. You'd better too."

Then Juniper went forward to the altar and, tending the candles to make them burn brightly, she knelt and touched

her head to the ground three times. She stood up, smiling, and she asked, "How do you want your chicken—fried, or boiled and served with soup?"

"Boiled," he said.

Now Juniper went to the kitchen with her mother, and Silok went out to the lichee grove to verify and recall all the details of the spot that he so loved. He had a good look at the Ten Peaks, so faintly blue now in the sunset, and the Stonepit to the north. And his eyes fell on the western slope, a stretch of undulating foothills now lying in the creeping shadow of the wooded hills further west. And he sat down in the spot near the Egret's Nest, where he and Juniper used to sit as children, and had a feeling that he had been like a stray cloud drifting without direction and had now come home. Every blade and every twig, every tiger lily seemed to have meaning for him.

Then Singapore seemed so far, far away.

He heard Kamchia's voice calling him. He immediately got up and saw that he had just come home from work. "Oh, Kamchia!" Silok said and went forward to meet him. They met cordially as school friends who had not seen each other for years and were now grownups. Kamchia was bare to the waist, a gray jacket thrown over his shoulder. His brown muscles moved in healthy, articulate movements, and his dark tan skin had a glossy sheen and was like that of a ripe pomelo, every pore open and clean.

After the first greetings, they walked back to the kitchen yard, where Kamchia said he needed a wash. He stood in the kitchen yard and poured buckets of water from the well and drenched himself. He went in to change and came out again in slippers and a clean suit of black pajamas.

The two sat on an old bench near the well and Kamchia said, wrinkling up his nostrils, "I smell something heavenly. What is it? I am ravenously hungry." His voice was strong and low.

"I bet you are, after a day's work in the fields."

"And after supper, I sleep like a top. Silok, I don't understand why I am so lucky."

"We all used to say at school that you have the face of good luck."

Kamchia smiled innocently. "I can almost believe it myself. I was an orphan, and now I have this farm to work on. And Juniper, you know."

Silok was silent.

Kamchia stood up, went up to the kitchen window, and shouted, "Juniper, what are you cooking?"

He came back and reported it was chicken. "We are celebrating your return. Of course. I don't have to tell her to do anything."

"Not everybody could find a woman like Juniper."

"She gives me this farm. She gives me a son. She keeps the bills. What more can a man ask? We are almost alone now. What a time we had when Tienkay's wife was around."

"Tell me about it."

"Juniper will tell you. It was so sinful, so wrong. I am glad they are living away now."

So the table was laid in the eastern room. It was an unpainted table with benches . . . on a mud floor. But Silok could swear he had never tasted such divine spring chicken, freshly killed and just slightly boiled in soup with only a sprinkle of salt. There was also a dish of salted bamboo

shoots from their own garden. Kamchia ate three heaping bowlfuls of rice. A good bowl of clean white rice and a hungry stomach spelled happiness on earth.

Juniper sat with her child on one side and Kamchia on the other, while the two mothers sat at the head of the table. Juniper had managed to nurse her one-year-old baby and put her to sleep while she was working in the kitchen, and now she had been put to bed.

Juniper's fate was small and her complexion still olive, and her lips were mobile.

"We cannot give you sea slugs or bird's nest," Juniper said. "But at least that chicken was killed by me only this afternoon. Tomorrow you will have cucumber soup. My mother and I have been reserving a good one on the vine for your arrival."

Juniper's mother, Mrs. Loa, had had an eye on Silok for her Juniper. Now she said, in an effort at courtesy, "We in the mountains cannot offer you anything elaborate. Everything is home-grown. You must have eaten foreign things we don't even know the names of."

"Nothing like home-grown products," commented Silok.

"And nothing like home-grown girls, too," said Mrs. Loa. "I bet you have seen a lot of foreign girls."

Juniper's eyes brightened. "What are they like?"

"They are just girls—Malays, Hindus, half-breeds. I don't see any difference."

The subject had come up so unexpectedly. Silok did not want to bring it up too quickly. Now his mother said, "Now, you have finished college and have a steady job, I guess you'll be picking a wife soon. If you bring home

one of those foreign girls, it will be the death of me. I won't want to live."

"Mother, I am still free."

"I don't ever want to lose you to a Malay girl. I know this has happened. Sometimes the men never want to come home again. In my home at Changchow, I had an uncle who came home with a Malay woman. She was not pretty either, fat and lazy and very simple-hearted. As a girl, I couldn't even understand why my uncle fell for such a woman. There is nothing a Malay woman can do that a Chinese woman can't do better—cooking, sewing, anything. I don't see why men take foreign wives when they can have Chinese wives."

"I should be afraid to meet one of them," said Juniper quite simply.

Silok wished they had not brought this up, but the subject seemed to interest the women.

"Silok," said Mrs. Loa, "as I say, nothing like home-grown girls. How can a *hoanpo*, a foreign woman, fit into our homes? When you choose a girl, you must think of your mother. You should let her choose a girl for you."

Silok tried to be pleasant. "You find me one like Juniper, and I will marry her right away."

"Oh, no," said Silok's mother. "You are not going to find one like Juniper."

"Oh, Auntie, will you stop talking about me? Let's drink a toast to Silok's return."

They drank a toast with barley wine called *lochiu*.

Mrs. Loa said, "That *lochiu* is home-brewed, too. It is from the jar we made before Grandpa passed away."

"Silok," said his mother. "You must drink a toast to Juniper and Auntie for taking such good care of your mother while you were away."

Silok toasted them and thanked them all heartily.

Farmers in the country went to bed early. Before saying good night, Juniper said to Silok, "Give me the soiled linen from the voyage that you want washed." He sorted out some of his clothing and gave it to her, for she was going to soak it overnight to make the washing easier the next day.

That night Silok slept in a loft that was reached by a wooden ladder from his mother's room. His head rocked with a world of sensations and images, new and old. From the little window in his loft, he saw the Egret's Nest, a silver-lined shape in the silent moonlit sky. The night was unbelievably quiet in the mountains. He stopped thinking and fell heavily asleep.

CHAPTER 11

SILOK HEARD NOISES in the kitchen below at the first cock-a-doodle-doo. He knew that Kamchia would be off to the field, and Juniper was up to cook a hot breakfast for him. The summer day began early in the mountains.

Silok woke up at the noise and took a moment to collect his thoughts and realize that he was back at the Egret's Nest. He heard the noise of chopping at the back and got up to take a peek from the high small window. There was Juniper in her pajamas, her hair let down in a queue, kneeling on the ground near a bamboo grove. She was chopping off some bamboo shoots. He felt strangely sleepy, the effect of the fresh mountain air, and went to bed again.

The next thing he knew the whole household was up. It must have been eight o'clock. He came down the shaky wooden ladder and found his mother up already, dressed in a blue linen jacket with broad sleeves and going around the front garden with Bong-ah, watering the flowers.

"Mother," he called from the kitchen door. "What are you doing so early?"

"Looking after the flowers. Did you sleep well?"

"Very well. I didn't know you were all such early risers." When he came near to her he asked, "Have you had your breakfast?"

"Yes. Yours is ready. Juniper was asking a minute ago if you were up. She told me that everything was ready and on the kitchen table."

He saw that some of the wrinkles he had noticed on his mother's face the night before had disappeared and he was happy to see that she was looking so well and was so well occupied. And he didn't wonder. There was no morning newspaper to distract her.

"Come here," she said. "We've been picking the green bugs on the rambler rose. They are all over the place." He strolled, happy of heart, toward the hedge where his mother and Bong-ah were. Her eyes creased as she tried to spot some bugs on the green stems. She looked so intensely interested in them. "Bong-ah and I have been catching them every morning."

"You are very happy up here," he said.

"Yes, very happy. Now you go and have your breakfast."

"Where is Juniper?"

"Washing at the back. They have been up two hours already."

At this moment Bong-ah ran off to tell his mother that Uncle Silok was up.

Silok was fascinated by the serenity of life in the mountain village. It occurred to him at that moment that his father had once said to him before he went abroad, "Son,

you will be going to college. Whatever you learn and whatever you are told, remember one thing. The world will not be saved by governments and politicians. It will not be saved by all the new knowledge you will be learning. *It will be saved by everybody doing his job well, and by a few people who think straight and speak the truth.*"

Silok and his mother had walked back toward the kitchen, when Juniper appeared at the door, holding the one-year-old baby girl in her arm and cooing to her.

"Morning," she said, crisp and sprightly as a mountain flower.

"Morning. You people are all up so early."

Juniper was sniffing at her baby and smacking her cheeks. "See? She is such a darling," she said. "Shall I heat up some dishes for you?"

On the table were three dishes—pickled cucumbers and salted egg and wined bean curd—under a sievelike cover the size of a basin. It was made of split bamboo and was intended to keep the flies away. There was also a dish of fine minced pork and black beans, which his mother suggested warming up, but Silok said there was no need. On the tiled oven, a pot of rice congee was kept warm, standing in hot water in an iron caldron.

Silok's mother took a bowl, filled it with congee, and asked him to sit down. Juniper took a chair, unbuttoned her jacket, put a nipple to the baby's mouth, and sat cradling her in her arms, watching Silok eat his breakfast. She had been washing in the backyard, had heard the baby cry, and rushed upstairs to bring her down. When the feeding was over, she strapped the baby to her back.

"Now I will go back and finish my washing," she said.

At breakfast, the mother and son exchanged news about all the relatives—about Bekum's marriage and her baby, and Tienkay and his wife, and many old friends at home—and Silok told her about his uncle's home in Singapore.

Both of them tried to avoid the topic of his leaving home again; neither of them wanted to think about it. The worst of it was Silok's knowledge that his mother was capable of the greatest sacrifice for her son and that she was not a person to stand in his way if he wanted to stay in Singapore and work. It was a dilemma he had to face alone.

He came out to find Juniper putting the last bit of laundry on the line. She had now put the baby down and was letting her play on the grass.

"Well," she said, and took up the empty tin pail. Resting the pail partly on her hip and leading the baby by the hand, she walked toward Silok.

"Have you already finished?" he asked.

"Of course."

"You get up at the crack of dawn. It makes me feel so ashamed."

"The summer days are hot. One does things best in the early morning. I will be busy with the household, but you and Bong-ah can play wherever you like."

"I will try to be up early with you people tomorrow morning."

"You will love it. The first day, of course, you must sleep more."

"Will Kamchia come back for lunch?"

"Not today. I've made him a lunch basket and he can get water or tea from the neighbors."

That day he posted a letter to his sister, saying that he was very anxious to see her and asking her to come home. He added that he must absolutely see her, if only to have a grand reunion.

By the time Bekum came it was already the middle of October. Tienchu was back from Siokay, and Mrs. Tan thought they should not permanently impose on Auntie Loa; besides, Bekum's child was with her, and there were just too many people. Auntie Loa and Juniper urged them to stay, but Silok's mother said they must go back to their own house in the valley.

"Hey, Silok!" said Bekum when they first met.

"Hey, sister!"

That was their style. He was as proud of her as she was of him. He always thought of her, next to his mother, as the person who was kindest to him. She had always taught him, encouraged him, chided him for his mistakes, pardoned him, and never lost her high hopes for him. She was four years his senior, enough older to teach him some sense, always, and yet not so much older as to have made them lose the sense of growing up together. Bekum knew the best and the worst in him, and had shaped and guided him in his formative years, with her sisterly love and guidance, part teacher, part playmate, as only a good sister could be, a role which neither teacher nor parents could fill. That was the gift of family life, for which there was no substitute in the world.

Bekum was shorter than Silok. Her young skin was firm, her eyes were bright and vivacious, and she had a set of very even teeth and a pointed chin. She had always talked about

her being a girl with resentment, because of the restrictions put on girls in those days. She was spirited and as keen for a college education as her brother.

"I received your letter and wanted to come at once, but could not," Bekum said. "The little one had a cold, the usual thing at this time of year, and I did not want to risk it." Her baby was only three years old.

They had many things to talk about. Sikeng, Silok's brother, was getting on well in Shanghai—too well, the sister thought—working as secretary in some Government bureau. He had married the daughter of a lieutenant colonel who was garrison commander of the Shanghai-Woosung area.

"Sikeng is finished," Bekum said. "We've lost him. He was always too ambitious, too anxious to get on."

"Do you mean I should not try to get on?" answered Silok.

"You know I don't mean that. Remember what Father said?"

Wonderful Father! Silok thought.

That was the kind of talk in the family. And that was what Bekum meant to the young Silok.

Bekum could not stay more than a week, but it was a wonderful week, the three of them together, herself, Silok, and their mother. Morning and night, at mealtime and between meals, the three of them could talk about all that they knew, all that they felt, and all that they dreamed together as a family. Since Juniper was also Bekum's close friend and confidante, hardly a day passed without their seeing her, either at their home or at the Egret's Nest.

Bong-ah came too. A great friendship had grown up be-

tween Silok and the child, not only because he was Silok's blood, but because Silok himself had never left off being a child, and enjoyed catching dragonflies and dipping his feet in the cold stream as much as the child did. And Juniper encouraged their being together. Every day the child would be coming down, either with her or by himself—if Silok did not go up—and would ask, "What are we going to do today?"

Naturally, the questions that kept coming up were what Silok was going to do about his work, and when he was going to marry. Silok felt terribly guilty about leaving his mother alone. How they wished they could always be together like this! How his mother, now suffering from a chronic cough, needed attention, needed to be surrounded by her dear ones!

"You are a college graduate now," Mrs. Tan said. "Do what is best for you. At my age, I don't want to change all my habits. Juniper will look after me. She is like a daughter to me, although a niece. Your father was good to me, and I am grateful. I ask nothing more than that you remember what your father has taught you. If you go wrong, go astray and get corrupted by the outside world, I would rather see you dead."

Silok heard those words, so simply spoken between mother and son, and therefore remembered them. She always looked at him with a kind of peering look, narrowing her eyes a little, softly, gently. Now she added, "Another ten years and I must go my way, to join your father. I don't want ever to hear him say when I meet him again that I have failed as a mother while he was away. The only thing I care is that you marry a good girl, the right kind of girl.

A woman can make a man, or break a man. It is your future wife who is going to live with you, not me."

In these very simple words, she had stated her position. Silok looked to his sister, and she said, "Mother is right. Man must work and woman must wait. It has always been like this since the world began." Quoting a very familiar ancient proverb, she said, "'A boy's future lies abroad, he must not stick in a back hole.' I know it is hard for Mother. What mother does not want to have her son by her side? Silok is a man now. We must not tie him down to this small town. But why did you change your mind about studying medicine?"

"I don't know."

"If you had studied medicine, you could be very useful right back here. Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. I have no stomach for it, I suppose. When I heard of cutting up the viscera of a human body, I was nauseated. I like law because everything is neat, precise, logical, and I like that."

"That is a good thing at least. The real important thing is what kind of a girl you are going to marry. Mother is right."

"That's right," echoed the mother. "Once you are done, you are done." She once more mentioned the Malay woman her uncle had taken home.

"Tell me," said Bekum. "Have you met a girl that you like?"

"Yes. There's one. Very much."

"A Chinese girl, or a foreign girl?"

"A Eurasian. Her father is Portuguese, her mother Chinese."

At last he had to tell them, while the two women listened, all concern and attention.

Silok was usually eloquent, but now he seemed embarrassed and stuttered a little.

"Mother," he said, "I have known her for about a year. I have wanted to tell you. Her name is Hamsun."

"What?" asked both women.

"Hamsun."

"Never heard of such a name!"

"Her father is Portuguese, as I told you."

A sudden change had come over his mother's face, as if someone had struck a dastardly blow at her back. She became very silent; all life seemed to have gone out of her face. She was the picture of complete disappointment, defeat, and bitterness.

"Mother, please, I beg you to listen."

"Well?" The old woman looked straight into her son's face. Bekum's face, too, was solemn.

"Mother, please listen to me. She means everything to me. Since knowing her, I never wanted to look at another girl in the streets."

"You took her to the streets and she went out with you?" asked his mother.

"Yes, in foreign countries, this is nothing. We share everything together."

"What a horrible idea! Those foreign girls!"

Bekum always wore bangs, like Juniper, and she had such beautiful eyebrows, and a relaxed kind of smile. But now her eyes were big and her lips parted in thought.

"Mother, I beg you. Do not be displeased with me."

The mother's face softened at the touch of her son,

and she drew a deep sigh and said, "I should have known that this would happen. You are young and probably will not listen to your old mother. I have raised you to this age. Your father wanted you to go abroad, and I let you, for your education. But I should have known. If you had been expelled from college and come home to your mother, I would not have minded. . . . But now I have nothing to live for, nothing."

"Silok, listen to me," Bekum said. "Mother is right."

"Why, sister, are you against me too?"

"Not against you. I am afraid for you. If you care for Mother and for your family, I would advise you to think carefully."

"But I do."

"No, Silok, you cannot think clearly; you are in love with that foreign girl. I know. Foreign girls demand too much. I have not been abroad, but I have seen movies and I know. They marry a man and want him to do as they wish. If he doesn't, then they ask for a divorce and marry another man. It is so easy. They marry and divorce and marry—again and again. That is not our idea of marriage. And if you do everything they say, you are tied down to them for life. You marry a foreign girl and you'll have to live like a foreigner and live the way she wants you to, not the way you want to."

"You are judging a girl without seeing her," said Silok.

"I merely want to caution you, and don't want you to become like your brother. I don't want to say, There goes Silok! I know nothing about this foreign girl, but you make me worried."

"But she loves me, cares for me."

Bekum looked at her younger brother with a kind of tender pity and said only, "Think about it."

The conversation that night ended unhappily for everybody.

The next day, Juniper came to lunch. It was as if everything had been forgotten. Everything was so right when she was with the Tan family. Silok knew what his sister was thinking. She knew that Bong-ah was her brother's child. Juniper had broken down and confessed to her why she had to arrange such a hasty marriage. Of course Bekum had told her mother. As far as the Loa family was concerned, nobody knew or suspected anything. So when Juniper came, Bekum and Mrs. Tan showed a special tenderness toward Juniper and her child, on account of the secret which bound them closer together. But Juniper had also said to Bekum, "My mother would be a fool if she thought Bong-ah was a child of Kamchia's. Such intelligence!"

CHAPTER 12

NOT LONG AFTER his sister had gone home to her husband, Juniper came to see Silok with a letter from Tienkay indicating that he was in trouble.

"Silok, what does this mean?"

He read the letter. Tienkay was being sued by creditors. Silok knew vaguely that Tienkay had taken money from home and formed a partnership with some friends in a sugar business in Changchow. The friends had absconded and the company owed several thousands of dollars.

Juniper's eyes followed him closely as he read the letter. He looked up and saw the grim concern written upon her face.

"It means that he will be in jail unless he pays up."

"I am not going to squander Grandfather's money like that. I will not."

"Then he will go to jail."

She compressed her lips, grim, bitter, uncertain. A slow fire was burning her up.

"We will not do anything hasty. How did it come about?" he asked.

"They started this business two autumns ago. The first year they made some money, I was told. Buying up the sugar harvest here, wholesale. Some in rock sugar, made locally here. There is only one small mill here, worked by oxen. Not enough. At Changchow, they do it better and are engaged in making crystal sugar. It is a good business, I understand. I was told that they were losing money last winter, on account of Japanese refined sugar."

"He must have gotten in the company of bad friends."

"I don't know."

"How did you let him leave home in the first place? You must have known he is not a businessman. He was never in business."

"Hah!" said Juniper in a tone of extreme exasperation. "I couldn't stand it any longer. Chu-ah, you know. That flirt had an eye on my husband. You know how honest my Kamchia is. I saw it all. She was taking every opportunity to touch him right in front of me. Devoid of shame."

She paused for breath. "Well, matters came to a head. They had to. One day she came into the kitchen, in tears and hiding her face. She cried that Kamchia had assaulted her. As she moved her hand, I saw a bad bruise over her cheekbone. Kamchia had come and stood in the door panting with rage. It was a shame. I don't like to repeat it. Mother was there too. Chu-ah kept on accusing Kamchia of trying to assault her, saying she had struggled and got loose and Kamchia had hit her.

"Kamchia was so honest he was stunned. He stuttered—I don't know what he stuttered. I was so annoyed I couldn't

hear a word. He only looked at me and said, 'I hit her. Yes, I hit her. She deserves it,' and quietly walked away. Mother and I didn't like her, and she knew that we didn't.

"That night I asked Kamchia what had happened. Well, I need not repeat it. They were alone in the back and he was trimming the pear trees. Well, she tried to seduce him."

"Do you mind telling me?"

She looked embarrassed, "It's truly shameful." She started to giggle and giggle.

"Will you tell me, or won't you tell me?"

When she had collected herself, she said, "I am sure she has tried the trick on other men before. She went up to my husband and said, 'I am growing plumper every day,' and she lifted her jacket and showed her hips to him and said, 'Touch me, touch me, and see.' She looked at him closely, and do you know what happened?"

Juniper started to laugh again. "Do you know what she had for a trouser belt? A piece of straw! With a jerk, she broke the straw and the trousers fell down. I am sure she has done this before with men, or she had learned it from her own mother. It's a shame, I say."

"What did Kamchia do?"

"She tried to embrace him right in the garden and said nobody was around. Can you imagine such shamelessness? He had to hit her to get away. Of course no one of us believed her story. Not even Tienkay, I suspect. She scolded Tienkay and spanked her own child and made hell for everybody around.

"Well, there was a point when Mother and I gave up. So when Tienkay proposed to go away and set up shop at Changchow, Mother and I were relieved, even if we had

to give him Grandfather's savings. Tienchu was quite sore. The younger brother said he had to have twelve hundred dollars to start the business. Why, we had no more than that. These were Grandfather's savings from his whole lifetime. Tienchu was not willing to part with the money. Eventually, some sort of arrangement was made. Tienchu and I were to have the property, but it was all spoken, of course. Do you think we can get away when a brother is in trouble? What are we to do?"

Silok knew he had not studied law for nothing. Here was a case for him. He wanted very much to help. He could do no less, for Juniper's sake.

"Is it a limited company?"

Juniper had never heard the expression before. He didn't know what kind of a contract Tienkay had with his partners. A limited company was a new thing; the family honor was the thing. Most probably, it was not even registered as a company, the state of things being what it was in those days.

It was a man-sized job, and he had to do it. He wrote to Hamsun and to his office about the cause of the delay, but of course he could not give all the details.

He made a trip to Changchow and took Tienchu with him, as head of the family. It was clearly a case of default by the partners. Silok argued with the creditors that they were not going to gain anything by putting Tienkay in jail. The company was unlimited, so what? Why didn't they go after the absconding partners?

Tienkay at this period had developed trouble with one of his eyes. To make matters worse, his wife was leaving him. At least, she was not around when Tienchu and Silok

were there. They asked Tienkay where she was and he replied that he didn't know.

Silok had a hard time trying to persuade Tienchu to make a settlement. He drew up a document in which the creditors agreed to a settlement of one seventh of the debts, payable within a year. It was as good a settlement as he could get. It meant that Tienchu would have to go home and sell part of his land to obtain seven hundred fifty dollars. The whole thing was done in a proper legal manner with witnesses, dates, and seals affixed. Silok derived a certain satisfaction from making use of his knowledge of law and gaining the respect of the creditors.

He and Tienchu tried to take Tienkay home with them, but never suggested the return of his wife. Tienkay said no, he would prefer looking for a job in the city.

When the news of the settlement was communicated to the Loa home, Juniper's mother felt relieved that her son did not have to go to jail, but Juniper was furious.

"This is the beginning of the end!" she said in anger. "Grandpa worked and slaved all his life to buy the land upon which we are living. I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do!" And she broke down completely.

"I will not sell land, I will not sell land," she repeated. "It is good land. I know Grandpa would not approve. I will buy land, buy more land. I will not sell."

"That's right," said Tienchu, "except that we've got all the land we can work ourselves."

Kamchia, who was listening to all this discussion, said, "I have an eye on that lot fifty paces from our farm. It is no good for rice, but we can grow beans on it. We'll work

harder. It can bring in fifty or sixty dollars a year. When I need help, I can get help free, because I have helped others."

One evening, two days later, Juniper came to Silok's house, and said, "Will you come with me? I want to talk to Grandpa."

On the way to the Loa ancestral graveyard, which was a good half-hour's walk across the fields, she said to him, "I am not selling. I've got a way out. I will pay the debt of seven hundred fifty dollars. We've got about three hundred saved up, and we have a year to pay. This winter the sugar cane will be good. I will buy up three hundred dollars of the sugar wholesale, and if Tienchu cannot go, I will go to Changchow myself. My credit is good with the sugar farmers. They used to sell to Tienkay. I calculate we'll make one hundred dollars, and I don't have even to advance a cent. They know me. If that brother of mine can sell the goods, so can I. Then next year, we'll have the lichees. I will not have to sell land at all."

Silok walked quietly by her side, and could not help being impressed by the worth of the girl he had missed making his wife. He vividly recalled the trip they had made together to Siokay. She had not changed, although she had been a young girl then and now was a woman and a mother.

The winter day was short and the sky was darkening early. She had a quilted jacket and quilted trousers on. Now and then, she looked at him, and it was the tender look she always had for him. She asked him many things about foreign lands.

It was only about a mile and a half to the graveyard situ-

ated at the beginning of the foothills. The grandfather had picked this spot for the family cemetery because it had a cluster of four or five tall cypresses and because it faced east. "Grandfather said he always wanted to look at the morning sun."

She was holding a bunch of winter plums and camellias and she laid these on the slab before the tombstone. The earthen mound was surrounded on three sides by a plastered ditch curving downward, and the plasterwork extended in front in the form of a cement hard court some fifteen feet across.

Her face was solemn.

"I am going to talk to Grandpa now."

"Do you want me to be present?"

"Of course. Grandpa loved you. And I am not ashamed of what I have done, although I have your child."

In the rapidly descending twilight, under a sky of fading blue, still lit by the sunlight on the Ten Peaks while the valley below was sinking in darkness and the air was chilly, she knelt down before the small tombstone, on which her own name was inscribed along with those of her husband and her brothers. She kowtowed three times and remained on her knees for a long five minutes, her head bent, her eyes dim with tears and her lips perceptibly moving.

At that time, he saw the real Juniper, the inner core of her character. It was something so genuine and sincere and at the same time so natural that he felt there was a certain nobility about her.

She got up with a cheerful face and went and sat down to one side of the white plastered edge. Her face was very

calm as she said, "I know my mind now. I just told Grandpa what I was going to do. When I could say it to Grandpa clearly, I knew he would approve, and when I could not quite say it to him, I knew he would not."

"You talk to Grandpa often?"

"Not often. But when I have to make a decision, I always come here alone, because I want to be alone with him. He understands everything."

"You are not alone now."

"Don't confuse me. I can feel I am alone with you, but with nobody else."

"Of course you have come here with Kamchia."

"Yes, on Tsingming festival. But not like this. You are the father of my child. I shall always love him because of that. When Bong-ah grows up, I will take him here too. He must know how great Grandpa is. And he will not go wrong if he remembers it. It is strange that there are a few Christians here who will not worship their ancestors. I can't understand it."

"Nor can I. They say it is a superstition to believe in the immortality of the human soul."

Juniper had never heard of such heresy. She was horrified. "Do they really believe that?"

"Well, it is not entirely like that. In a way they say that they believe that human souls are immortal. But when you are not allowed to communicate with your dead relatives, then of course you don't believe souls are immortal. If souls are immortal, you must want to communicate with them and serve them and remember them as if they were alive, as we say."

"How can one help it, indeed? That is the strangest thing I ever heard. You know they are still alive and do nothing about it."

"Well," said Silok. "It is this way. They say we don't believe, and we say they don't believe."

Juniper said, "I shall never let Bong-ah grow up with those strange ideas."

He held her hand and said, "May I ask you one thing?"

"Of course. Anything that I can do."

"I have a great problem. You will put me in great debt if you will look after my mother. Like last month. She was so happy up at the Egret's Nest and having the company of Bong-ah."

"Yes, she really improved a great deal."

"She told me that you brought her a pot of tea every morning at the crack of dawn. Little things like that mean a great deal in her old age."

"That is the easiest of things for me. I did that for Grandpa."

"You see I am not fulfilling a son's duty, leaving my poor old mother alone. Nor can she go and live with my sister, because her husband's mother is living with them. We will be glad to pay for Mother's upkeep."

"Don't be ridiculous. Are not your mother and my mother cousin sisters?"

"I don't mean paying for rent. I mean there are things. My mother can well pay."

"You leave it to me. Auntie is so fond of Bong-ah. I'll talk to Mother about it. Both of them are widows. Why not? I'll fix a nice room for her."

Silok's voice trembled. "You will?"

"Of course. The air is also so much better. And she will have people to talk to all day."

"Oh, Juniper!" He held her hand and pressed it softly. "She loves you like her own daughter. I will be able to send money to her from time to time."

Juniper pressed his hand and said simply, "You leave it all to me. We'd better go back."

They were so absorbed in their talk that they did not realize it was completely dark. Juniper's eyes were trained to see in the dark.

"Remember the night we passed at Siokay?" she said with a simplicity which surprised him.

"Yes, I always remember that."

"Did you remember me while at Singapore?"

"Juniper," he said to her. "You are the one soul closest to me, next to my mother. I have that faded picture of the Egret's Nest hanging on my wall all the time. You and me, with our backs close together. Remember?"

"Oh, that one! It shows only our backs."

"That picture is etched in my mind, in my soul, forever."

They did not speak of love, but they were extremely happy together. When they reached Silok's house, supper was waiting for them. At the table, they told Silok's mother about their plan for her, and she was pleased and said, "Silok, you are a good son to think of thus providing for me."

Juniper said, "And you'll have Bong-ah to play with and you'll hear cock-a-doodle-doo from your bed every morning. Didn't you say that the cock-a-doodle-doo sounded better and prettier up there, echoing down the valley?"

"Yes, I remember saying that," said Silok's mother.

"Then come. You'll hear it every day. Silok, I bet you never hear a cock-a-doodle-doo in Singapore."

"Well," answered Silok slowly, "I can't say that I really do, can I?"

Juniper replied quickly, "A cock-a-doodle-doo is never at its best unless you hear it half a mile away. It is fantastic. It is meant for open spaces, not for crowded houses in the cities people like you live in."

This conversation had a deep effect on Silok, unimportant as it may seem. Later it was made almost a joke of in their correspondence, for Juniper kept on asking him if he had heard cock-a-doodle-doo in Singapore.

That night, Silok lighted a torch and accompanied her to the fence around her house. Then he returned alone.

CHAPTER 13

THE UNCLE HAD BEEN PUT OUT for several days, ever since his nephew had moved out to set up an apartment with the Eurasian girl. He had been stung, not with anger, nor with remorse, but with an abject and totally unexpected humiliation.

It was difficult to believe that Silok could do this to him.

"My brother's breed. No doubt about it. Stubborn as a mule."

It was six in the evening. Juana had just come back from the party given by Silok and Hamsun for a few of their intimate friends. They were in Silok's room now. Silok had moved his personal things but the room and furniture remained unchanged. A feeling of emptiness hung about the room, like that of a guest who had departed.

"Do you want this room? You can move over if you want to."

Juana hesitated for a second. "And you?"

"I'll remain in your room."

She thought it would be a relief. "I don't mind. There is this desk which will be useful. Besides, it is a sunnier room. When our son is born, I want to put him here."

She had already told him that she was expecting. She had also told Silok. The latter knew that it was not the uncle's child, and marveled at the woman who always got what she set out to get. With whom he did not care to ask.

"Who was at the party?"

"Siu-eng, and some of Silok's college friends, and her girl friends, mostly Eurasians. Hamsun's mother was there too."

The uncle was silent for a short while.

"Fantastic! To leave a house like ours and go and live in a cramped little flat. How is he going to support himself with his salary?"

Juana chuckled. "I have tried to persuade him. But you know it is useless. Perhaps after a time, he may regret it. But I have a feeling he will stick it out and do exactly what he wants."

The Buddhist aunt had come to the door so noiselessly that she was unobserved. She was the least disturbed of them all by the changes in the family.

She asked what the new flat was like and Juana told her. "Not much of a place. A two-room affair, with a tiny kitchen. Sharing a terrace, partitioned off by lattice-work, with a lot of other families."

The aunt said, "If the young people are happy, let them."

"Was that bastard child there?"

"I didn't see him. I understand he is living with his grandmother in the old house."

"The idea of bringing up Lakjio's bastard in our family!"

The uncle was touchy on that subject. But the aunt said, without a change of tone in her voice, "There is no accounting for things. *Omitabha!* We have to be thankful that nothing worse has happened. We all live what is predestined for us. Only thing I would say is that he is still your nephew, no matter what he does. If you two had not been both as stubborn as mules, we could have accepted her."

"What? Accepted Lakjio's bastard in my house!" he fairly sputtered.

The aunt smiled sweetly. "There you go again. If they like to live the way they want, it is their business. The only thing I would like to ask of you is forget and forgive. If he should need money, I would not deny him help. Who can tell how this is going to turn out? How did Siu-eng take it?"

"I don't know. She seemed very happy at the party. And there was that reporter friend of his, Weysen, talking with her all the time."

The uncle felt further mortified.

"She has always been partial to Silok, I know. I don't understand these educated ladies who paint and publish poems in the papers. From my own family too. Not one of them appreciates what I do for them. I brought her over and got her that job through my influence."

The bitter mortification was that his own nephew had not respected him enough or cared enough to try to please and obey him. The young nephew should have been aware that money was power, and it was the uncle's right to give

to whom he liked. If Silok would only say, "Yes, Uncle," as a normal sensible young nephew would . . . But Silok just did not care.

Silok was as determined to marry Hamsun as the uncle was set against it. The stubborn bulls had locked horns, and neither was willing to yield.

Silok had come to him and told him about wanting to marry the Eurasian girl, and they had gone over it several times.

"Have you been getting on with that *tsabaw*?" the uncle had asked. This was a coarse word corresponding to "that dame" or "that female" in English.

Silok was visibly taken aback. "You mean Hamsun?"

"Yes, I mean that foreign girl. You are not serious, are you?"

"Perhaps I am," answered Silok readily.

"Silok," the uncle said gravely, "foreign girls are frivolous and Hamsun is half foreign, *poa hoan-ah*. They love to spend and spend and spend. You can't afford it. They haven't got the breeding and sense of duty of our women. Look at me. I am lord of my home. Do you think that if I had married a foreign wife, I could be lord of my house? Don't fool yourself. There are plenty of our girls who would be glad to marry into our family. It is so much more comfortable. A foreign girl is pretty—but she spends. Hamsun is pretty, I know. But if you want to *khoa tsabaw*—see nude girls—there are plenty of places where you can have your eyeful every night. But a home is a different thing. Do you think a foreign wife, even a half foreign wife, would allow me to have concubines? These things don't work. Our customs differ. You'd better listen to your old uncle's advice."

"Uncle, please. I have always listened to you. But this matter . . . is a matter of how one feels. She is a wonderful girl—is a matter—how one feels. . . ." He was incoherent.

"You know that her mother is a mermaid?"

"What of it? Father and you came as coolies. What difference does it make?"

"What of it, you say?" His uncle's voice was raised a little. Then he controlled himself by turning the cigar in his mouth. Silok saw the gold ring shining on his finger. "Remember that your father and I always made an honest living. And don't tell me it is easy to rise from being a day laborer to this position I am in today. You can't say, What of it? You go and labor at the plantations for one day, and you will see . . . Now, for women to come into our family, I want good breeding, good manners, a sense of duty, and respect for elders. You can't say, What of it? You'd better consider carefully. Your father is dead and I am responsible. Now you can go and get ready for supper."

What exasperated him most was that since Silok's return, he had stopped seeing all Chinese girls.

"You've been acting crazy," he said to his nephew one day. "You have stopped seeing all our Chinese girls. You are infatuated with that half-European . . ."

Silok held his temper. "I suppose I am. A Eurasian girl is no different from anyone else. Why can't you take them as individuals and forget their race? I had meant to talk this over with you, Uncle."

"Then don't," said the uncle abruptly.

"Uncle, I am sorry but I must. We mean to be engaged. As you know, we have known each other for a year. I love her."

"You are infatuated."

"No, I truly love her. Uncle, please."

"I still say you are infatuated."

"All right, infatuated. I cannot imagine myself marrying anybody but her. Can you understand?"

"But does she love you? Oh, yes, these foreign girls. I bet she says she does. So you just lose your head. Your father is dead, and I treat you like my own son. Now this generation is coming up. I want to hold my head high among the others. You marry a Chinese wife. A Chinese wife is a wife for life."

The uncle was fidgety. His voice became more throaty and he bit hard on his cigar and turned it around nervously in his mouth.

Silok was conscious of his determination, so he kept quiet, listening respectfully.

His uncle went on. "Now this girl, Hamsun, what is her family name?"

"Her father was a Portuguese. Her mother's name is Ma. She is a Cantonese. That is good enough. And Hamsun talks our dialect, eats our food. I don't see why she can't be accepted in our family."

The uncle looked at him over his spectacles with a hard, full look. "You are making it very difficult for me. Anyway you have to give me her name, and the names of her father and grandfather, at least on the Chinese side. You know that is the rule, and I will look into it."

"Very well, then. But I tell you, Uncle, I will marry her or nobody else. I am marrying her, this family isn't."

This proved too much for the old man. He was incensed and raised his voice, "This is rebellion! *You* are marrying

this girl, not our family! I ask you, Where do you come from? Where would you be without your family? How dare you? When a daughter-in-law comes into my family, don't I have to feed her, clothe her? Doesn't she sleep under my roof? And you dare to say a daughter-in-law has nothing to do with the family. Where are your senses? Well . . ."

He left his sentence unfinished and, leaning on his cane, went upstairs in a huff.

To Silok's great surprise, the uncle came down again with a pack of cards, on which were photographs of European women—completely nude, or almost completely. And he said, "Take them. Look all you want. I was looking through my office drawers and brought these home for you. It gives you an idea of their morals. And if you think you can marry any one of them, just tell me."

Silok did not raise his hand, but the uncle pushed them to him and said, "Take them." The uncle's look was one of infinite pity and of concern at the same time. He managed to make the young man look foolish. Silok was embarrassed and put them in his pocket.

"You fool!" the uncle said and walked away.

The explosion had come when the uncle, upon his own inquiries, discovered that, in addition to Hamsun's being a mermaid's child, she also had had a child by Lakjio. His voice boomed through the two stories of the house. No argument was possible.

"Get out!" he shouted. "And don't bring that girl into my home again."

"I will, gladly," Silok had answered, holding his temper.

How much Juana had had to do with stirring up the uncle's anger, or whether she had really tried to bring him

around, as she told Silok, the latter was never able to find out.

Hamsun had admired Silok's courage in sticking to his determination to marry her. He knew that with his meager salary as an employee, he would have to economize. They had found a small flat which had become vacant in a three-storied apartment house in the Tanglin section, beyond Newton Circus. There were some thirty-odd families in it. It had all the modern conveniences, and was in a nice wooded area, with many trees around and big shady grounds where children could play. Many English clerks lived there with their families, those who could not afford to live in villas with gardens, in this residential section.

Hamsun had found this flat through a Eurasian friend. There were a great many Eurasian families living here also—the working people were employees of banks, postal clerks, secretaries, and some small shopkeepers. Hamsun and Silok liked the place because it had a relatively nice atmosphere.

The apartments were small and noisy, since there were many children running all over the place. The occupants were very much thrown together, yet they were neighbors only in the purely physical sense of the word.

The poor white clerks with their English wives would hardly do more than admit a nodding acquaintance with the seven-eighths whites; the seven-eighths whites looked down on the half-whites; and these in turn were not quite as cordial as they might be with the quarter-whites.

But Silok was happy in that new home, with Hamsun.

As far as she was concerned, she was his bride, even though they were not formally married. Since the situation

had changed drastically, and he had been thrown out by the uncle, neither Hamsun nor her mother had insisted on a marriage ceremony. They would wait and see. Meanwhile Hamsun was relieved from the drudgery of being a waitress.

In fact, they were both delighted at the idea of having a completely independent and separate home, where their goings-on would not be subject to the scrutiny of so many in-laws.

CHAPTER 14

SOME SIX MONTHS HAD PASSED.

It did seem that Silok was now living in straits, always too proud to ask his uncle for money. It was doubtful whether he was able to send money to his mother.

When Weysen saw him in his office, he saw the picture of the Egret's Nest opposite Silok's desk. Silok said his wife would not have it in her flat.

Weysen never saw a more devoted husband. Like the others, Silok was working in his shirt sleeves. An old-fashioned ceiling fan with huge propellers was churning away overhead, and he caught the tail end of the breeze it created. He didn't go home for lunch, because that meant a long walk in the scorching sun. He had spent a considerable sum for an icebox and a beautiful console gramophone, for Hamsun loved to dance.

Silok kept on grinding away day after day as the ceiling fan ground away over his head, but he made less noise than the creaking fan. To make ends meet, he even took

extra work on weekends. There was no doubt about it. He was neatly caught in the rat-race of the modern economic machine, like millions of others, hard-working, hopeful, living on a salary, and trying to make an impression on the boss. He was so tired after work that he hardly had the time or the inclination for a leisurely stroll.

It must have been depressing for Hamsun too. No more the swimming parties in Johore Bahru. No more the idling at the night fair on the waterfront or at the Great World amusement center. They were living a cramped life, on a cramped budget, in a cramped space where there was hardly a moment free from the noise of the neighbors' children and wives.

All the blood of the pretty Hamsun craved for the raw, rousing sensations produced by the rhythm of jazz and the Charleston, in order to stifle the hunger and the dullness of a middle-class life.

In a way, too, Silok had dropped out of the society of his uncle's Chinese friends. Silok once told his friend how true was his sister's remark that it was the women, not the men, who make the home, because they were there all the time and men weren't.

He still saw Weysen, at least once a week, at lunch. Once in a while, he called on Aunt Siu-eng, and even brought Hamsun along. Except for these two, there was no one he could really talk to. About once a month, he went to have supper with his uncle. Conversation at table was superficial, as the two men held each other at bay, and their relationship was never again what it had been. Silok found it easier to talk with his aunt or with Juana.

More and more, Hamsun determined the friends they

were to meet. Silok would come home to find that his wife had arranged a party. Everyone would drink orange juice and eat popcorn and listen to jazz. There would be some of Hamsun's old Eurasian friends and Eurasian couples. When they really felt like it, they rolled up the carpet, turned on some jazz, and danced on the small amount of floor that was not occupied by the sofa.

Silok tried to put up a brave front and be sociable with all his wife's friends when all he wanted was some quiet and to go to bed.

"Why didn't you let me know?" he would ask after the guests had left at about half past eleven. "Tomorrow I have to get up early. You want me to keep my job, don't you?"

"But these are my friends. I have social obligations. I have to give a party in return, don't I? You didn't want me to call you at your office. How am I supposed to communicate with you and let you know?"

Like all young couples, they kissed and made up.

Silok threw himself upon the bed with a groan.

Either because Hamsun was consummate in the art of charming a man, or because Silok had the remarkable gift of maintaining the illusion of a great love, they got on pretty well.

The fact was Hamsun was both disappointed and bored. Both Silok and Hamsun were rediscovering themselves. Their life together had not turned out to be what she had imagined—having a car, a villa, status, nice clothes, and plenty of money to throw away. Nor was it an eternal round of kissing in bed. Their flat was cramped as it was, and they

did not plan to have a baby yet. They just could not afford to have a bigger apartment.

The world was not laid out in the pattern she was born for and craved. Those neighbors she met in the same building were not too friendly; they were too occupied with their own troubles or were as bored as herself. She had decided to live with Silok for security; now she did not feel too much security, and the price she paid for it was boredom. Silok was away at the office all day, there was not much housework to do in the two-room flat, and she was not much interested in housekeeping anyway. The world of girlhood romance was gone; above all, the freedom of a bachelor girl to do what she liked, to spend what she earned, to be admired by those whom she liked, to sing and dance and flirt and make herself available—all this had been exchanged for this dull, monotonous life of a poor woman waiting for her lover to come home at night.

Hamsun started to count pennies. She had not had more money before, but the difference was that before, she knew she had earned every penny she had and could do with it what she liked, while now she had to ask Silok for it.

Out of sheer boredom, she sought out her friends. Nina was now happily married to a Chinese merchant in Kuala Lumpur, and was living in a nice, big house with her husband's family.

There was Sally. Sally was living in a flat near the Empire Dock. Sally was vivacious. Sally was fun. She was a healthy young girl like herself. On her visits to Sally, they used to play cards together. At least, Hamsun found in

Sally someone to talk to, someone who understood and loved the same things.

Sally was a bachelor girl, twenty-seven or twenty-eight, several years her senior. From Sally's window, they could see Singapore Bay. Fifty or sixty steamers of all sizes were plying the harbor every day. The east window opened out on the roofs of crowded narrow streets and a few tall European buildings. The flat was an attic on the third floor. At night, they could see the stretch of lights leading toward Collyer Quai and the Clifford Pier.

The view gave one a sense of the excitement of a great metropolis, a feeling of being in the center of things. There was a coffee shop on the ground floor. Singapore was then dark, mysterious, beautiful, teeming with exciting life.

Curiously, whether in the daytime or at night, Hamsun felt at home here, of being in the city and belonging to it, in contrast to the way she felt about the quiet residential area of Tanglin.

Sometimes Hamsun and Sally would go out together, turn left, and be in the thick of pedestrian traffic near Change Alley, which was surrounded by Chinese shops, Malay eating places, Moslem bazaars, and Hindu stores selling silks, precious stones, and jewelry. This section was far more crowded than the area around the ice cream parlor where Hamsun had worked. Sally knew all the ins and outs, while the section was comparatively new to Hamsun. Sometimes they would go out at ten in the morning, take a turn around Collyer Quai, stop at the arcade for lunch, and stroll back again.

Hamsun felt much happier when she had spent a half day with Sally, who was very warmhearted by nature and,

moreover, had much money to spend. Sally reminded her of the freedom she had lost.

"How are things going with you?" Sally asked one day.

"So so."

"What do you mean?"

"Bored stiff. The same routine every day. He is away all day. There are hardly any neighbors that I care to talk to. I never knew it would be like this. And when I want to buy a new hat or something, I have to stretch out my hand for money."

"Why, I thought he was very wealthy. I was told that they have rubber plantations."

"Yes, but it isn't that way at all. The uncle controls all the money. He disapproved of the match and we refuse to live with his family. Silok is too proud to ask for help. We'd rather be independent."

"Still . . ."

"Still nothing. I was happy and gay and free. Now I am not."

"Silok still loves you?"

"Very much. That is the tragedy. He comes home very tired—sometimes has work to do at night. I kiss him good night and go to bed. We have nothing to talk about together. Sometimes I wish he would get angry, so that I could throw things at him."

"Why do you talk like that?" Sally asked, and waited with bated breath to hear her reply.

"Well, I don't know. I just feel that way. Perhaps unconsciously I am blaming him for this life I am leading. Perhaps he is a bit too sweet for me. I wish he would sometimes fly into a temper, or beat me or something. I have seen

some couples in my building fight and scream and then make up. At least it is more exciting."

Sally had something in common with Hamsun. She was part French and part Parsee, born in Bombay. Anyway that was what she was told; the one thing certain was that she had grown up in Calcutta. She had a very white face, black hair, worn very short, and an enormous bosom. She wore a low-cut blouse which she kept pulling to the left and to the right alternately. "For all I care, I may be an Algerian," she said with an easy, lackadaisical smile.

They were sitting in Sally's room. "If you had to take a man, why did you pick a Chinese?" Sally said. "If you wanted a man who could break into a towering rage and spank your bottom, you should have found an Arab, a Turk, or a Frenchman." Sally grinned, revealing a mouthful of immaculate white teeth.

Hamsun studied her carefully. She was so easy and so sure of herself. Hamsun admired her humor and her courage.

"Chinese are too tame for me," Sally continued. "They have been civilized too long. I mean kowtow and all that sort of business. Give me an Arab or a Turk any time . . . Don't look at me like that. They are all right if they have a villa and can give you a car. For Christ's sake, what is life for anyway? I never knew you were such a screwball. I am your friend, and I'm telling you God's own truth."

"You are very funny," answered Hamsun.

"I am not funny at all. It's God's own truth. I'm telling you. Look at this city. I love it, all of it. What is everybody working for anyway? Money and love, isn't it?"

"Of course, but you can't have both."

"Listen to me. I am older than you and have seen a bit of this world. It's money and love, I say, that keep the world going. I tell you that there is nothing like a good steak and making love. About money: either you have it or you haven't got it. I wouldn't mind marrying a baldheaded millionaire, would I? But I can't. As for love, I bet you I have more love and enjoy more than you with your pinch-penny Silok. I am not saying anything against him, but I prefer the European men, don't you?"

"Some of them are so tall and handsome. I suppose it is in our blood."

"Exactly. I like them. They are more like ourselves. I once had a Chinese friend. He paid me all right. But I just couldn't stand his flat nose. I told him not to come again. He asked me why and offered to pay what I asked, but I couldn't tell him. I like tall men, muscular men. It's in our blood, as you say."

"What do you do?"

"I work the docks. I just love men. Shiploads of them. For Christ's sake, there isn't a man who can resist a good young figure and who would mind having a good time. You are attached, of course. That is different. But I am free. I do what I like. I don't work for anyone. And I make pretty good money."

"I am different, of course. I am not like you. I have a home and a man. I can't do this to him. Would you believe it? I have been faithful to him. I have not gone out with any man since I came to live with Silok."

Sally detected a note of envy in her voice.

"Of course not. I wouldn't advise you to lead the kind of life I am leading. It's so easy to pick up a man. But I wouldn't advise you to do it. It's too risky. I don't want

you to get into trouble with your dear, devoted Silok. Except of course you don't know what I know about men like him. I am telling you about my own life. I am not trying to change yours."

There was finality in Sally's words. Among Hamsun's friends there had never been one in Sally's profession. Sally had stopped talking but Hamsun wanted to know more.

"Go on. Tell me more about yourself," she said.

Sally looked out the window. She must have purposely chosen this flat in the street right behind the docks, which gave her a commanding view of the harbor. "There is *S. S. Kwongsun*, which came in yesterday. There is an Irish boy on it who is madly in love with me. She plies between Hong Kong, Manila, Jakarta, and Singapore. Every three or four weeks, he will turn up. He is unmarried and wants to marry me. But I say, No. I don't want to be tied up with a sailor—what for? So we remain friends. Every time his ship comes into port, he comes and sees me, and we have a good time together. He takes me out to a restaurant or a movie. I don't moon about my Irish boy during his absence. Christ, no! My Italian boy is on the *S. S. Colombo*. My Greek boy is on the *S. S. Maltese Cross*. They alternate pretty conveniently, with others to fill in the gaps. I know a Portuguese captain who adores me. He is married of course and shows me a photo of his wife. That doesn't make any difference. We are just good friends. I never lack for lovers . . ."

This was typical of Sally's conversation. She could go on and on for hours. Talking was for her a way of being alive. She could say "I love you" in thirteen languages.

CHAPTER 15

HAMSUN KNEW that Sally could easily have arranged a rendezvous for her if she had asked for it. But she knew she shouldn't do it. She found pleasure in meeting Sally again and again, for Sally was spirited and vivacious and always cheered her up. Hamsun always came away with the feeling that she was making a great sacrifice for her lover.

There was no question but that her love for Silok had soured. She longed for freedom, and looked back nostalgically to her girlhood days when she had been independent and free, working in the ice cream parlor. She would rather work any time and make her own living. The more she thought about it, the more she yearned for that freedom again. The fact that Silok was so madly in love with her, so dependent on her, made it more tragic.

Silok felt it of course. He would come home and find her nervous and moody. Silok would do anything for her, but he felt that she was no longer content, that a shadow

had come into their life—a lengthening shadow, invisible, mysterious, that crept into his soul and chilled his heart, and which he could not understand. He had never expected this.

“Darling, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.”

“You don’t seem to be happy with me.”

“How do you expect me to be happy cooped up in this hole with nothing to do all day? You have your work. What do you expect me to do?”

“Would you rather we go and live with Uncle?”

“Certainly not.”

“If it’s money, I can ask Uncle for it. He can give me a couple of thousand dollars any time I ask for it. I know. I just would rather not, but for you I will. I am trying to be independent, and I think he respects me for it.”

Hamsun was gloomily silent. There was no expression on her face.

“Please understand, darling,” Silok said. “Every young lawyer has to go through this mill. It’s we young lawyers who do all the dirty work, prepare the documents for the boss. I am learning things. We must be patient for a few years. Perhaps in a few years I may set up my own practice. Then it will be different.”

“Meanwhile, what do you expect me to do? Skimp and save on your six hundred fifty Singapore dollars a month until you become a fat established lawyer and I am no longer as attractive and young as I am. I know those fat, established, successful men.”

“How do you know?”

"I just know. You will be running after young girls."

This was the last straw. He looked at her very hard, as he had never looked at her before. He tightened his lips. For the first time, he seemed to look into the soul of the woman he had taken for his own, and whom he still loved madly.

"Is that what you think of me?" he said at last.

"What should I think? Aren't all men like that?" She had got up, paced the floor restlessly, then beat her fist upon a sofa cushion and sat on it. She stared at Silok coldly.

Silok was aghast. She had never been like that. He came over and sat beside her and took her hand in his.

"Darling, please. I can't say that I am giving you a luxurious home. But I thought we had agreed to live independently of my uncle. I know it must be hard on you."

He tried to kiss her, but she averted her face and said, "Please don't."

"Good heavens, what's wrong? Please say something."

"Nothing is wrong."

She resumed her gloomy silence. Her hair was combed to one side. She looked at him out of the corners of her eyes, exactly as she had looked in that portrait she had given him before they were engaged. With her legs curled up on the sofa, she was still the ravishing beauty who could make any young heart flutter. But Silok felt that she had stopped loving him, as clearly and definitely as if she had said it in so many words.

He tried to face up to the reality. "I know you don't love me any more." His heart palpitated as he waited to hear what she was going to say.

"Aren't there other things besides love?" she replied.

She got up and, without a further word, went to her bed.

The next morning, Silok woke up early. Last night's scene had left a bad taste in his mouth. What had come over Hamsun? Well, he thought, morning was the best time for making up.

They slept in twin beds. The flat was on the second floor, and a half-closed louver door, with a grilled railing, looked out on a wooded area below. Silok got up and stood before the railing for a few minutes, making just enough noise to make her aware that he had got up. He looked back at her shapely form covered with a sheet. Her hair lay about her pillow; her eyes were closed.

Standing on the dresser was a little music box that played a tune called "Love in Paris." They used to love it while they lay cuddled together in the morning. He went and turned on the box. If she was not fast asleep, she should hear it and offer a loving "good morning." But she was completely silent.

He played it again and again. He was waiting for the moment when she should first open her eyes and he would come and make love to her and make up. Hamsun made no move whatsoever. Then she suddenly opened her eyes, got out of bed, and went to the bathroom. She was gone a long time.

That was it. Their romance had evaporated. She was still unhappy, still in a bad mood. It was something more than the nervousness of one evening, which a good night's sleep could put an end to.

By the time she had come out of her bath, he had made

the coffee and put it on the breakfast table. She came out in her pink bathrobe, offered him a fugitive kiss on the forehead, and sat down.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Suppose so," she replied without enthusiasm.

Raising the coffee cup, he said, "Here's to a good day!"

She raised her cup and said, "To another day!" The way she said it made it sound dismal, like another day to a prisoner.

He sensed that Hamsun wished to get rid of him. He said nothing but finished his coffee and went off to his office.

It was still early. He walked the distance, past some shady areas, before he came to the business streets. At eight, the tropical sun was already unbearably dazzling. He felt more than anything else a sense of failure, not failure in his profession, but in the dream of a great love that he had built up all his life—a love infinite, all-consuming, and all-transforming, that should shelter him all his life like a magic spell.

It was the little things. He remembered how they used to walk in the woods and on the beach, her arm always around his back while she tossed her head and laughed. Now, if she met him coming home, there was not the gladness in her eyes. While ascending the stairs, she would walk straight ahead.

He recalled that on a Saturday evening he had gone with her to a restaurant at Bedoc. There was a small dancing platform some twenty feet square. A string orchestra and piano were playing. Some five or six foreign couples were dancing.

"Shall we dance?" he asked after supper.

"Don't feel like it."

"Oh, please. I know you love to dance."

She got up to oblige him, and danced silently. Hardly two minutes passed before she said, "Let's go back."

He was aware that she was looking at the European men and they were looking at her.

"Why, everybody is looking at you. You are so beautiful," he said.

"It is because we are so *different*," she replied.

Because he was a Chinese and she was ashamed of it? How could he know? He could swear that if he were not there, she would enjoy dancing all night with the European men.

He was a failure, he knew, in inspiring the great love which was his dream. It just didn't work.

He could never think of stopping himself from loving her.

That afternoon after work, he went to his uncle. He would ask for a thousand dollars. His uncle had been waiting for him to come one day with just such a request. He did not have to give reasons. The uncle knew that he just could not subsist on his salary.

"Take this," said his uncle. "I knew you would need the money. How is everything?"

"Oh, fine, just fine."

Silok knew it wasn't fair to expect Hamsun to skimp and save while he could easily provide her with more money. It was just his cursed pride.

With the check in his pocket, he determined to come home and make amends.

"See what I have got?" He flashed the check before her as soon as he entered the apartment.

"Where did you get it?"

"From Uncle."

Hamsun's face relaxed visibly. "I thought you didn't want to."

"It was just my confounded pride. I didn't want to. I realize that I have been unfair to you. My uncle has all the money. Take this and buy anything you want."

"Did he ask questions?"

"No. He had more or less expected it."

"You did thank him?"

"I did. Let's go out for a good dinner tonight. Shall we?"

They went to the Lamtian roof restaurant. Silok was high-spirited, hopeful. This was the life they should have led. There was no reason why he could not take Uncle's car for a Sunday outing and go somewhere. Relatives could be very pleasant if they saw each other once in a while and did not step on one another's toes.

Hamsun did not like Chinese wine or fancy European wines. They had port, which went well with some delicious dishes.

Silok wanted to make a night of it. After supper they went to see a movie, and after coming out of the theater, he said, "Let's go to the beach."

It was his dream, had always been his dream, to go alone with her to the beach. The two of them would be alone, lying under the starry sky and listening to the distant swish of water. They would spend a night there, telling each other of their love and longing, talking of things, discuss-

ing things, completely alone while the universe slept. He had always thought of their first meetings, those nights on the beach when they first had declared love to one another. He wanted to recapture that first frenzy of love. Surely, her love could be rekindled; it had, it seemed to him, merely been suffocated by the circumstances of their life together.

They took a taxi and went along the East Coast Road. A night fair⁴ was going on. They got out of the taxi and walked together on the road leading to the beach.

Hamsun was silent. She was neither gay nor depressed. She was just friendly. But her arm was not around his waist. They walked on the slightly moist sand.

Up above, the dark shore line revealed a few houses. They must have walked a hundred yards down a curving road to a spot where the beach was completely deserted. Only a faint light came from the distance. Hamsun did not seem to want to stop, but just went on, as if she dreaded being alone with him in the dark.

Finally, he said, "Let's sit down." He had brought a light coat for the evening, and spread it carefully on the sand.

The critical moment, the moment he had so longed for, had arrived. They both lay down on the sand.

He bent to kiss her, but she said, "Please don't."

"I don't understand you. What has come over you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't seem to be happy with me."

"You have been very kind to me, and I appreciate it. It is not sex, which is not important. It's just the little things . . . I can't explain."

He put his arm around her and again bent to kiss her, and she said, "I have told you . . ."

He was sadly disillusioned. Once they used to dream of these nightly meetings when they would surrender their souls and bodies to one another. They could have recaptured that dream again. A night on the beach for lovers, alone. It was perhaps silly for them to come out to make love on the beach when they could have made love in their own room. They were living together, sleeping in the same room, and they had not touched each other lately. But he had thought that by bringing her back to the scene of their early love-making, they could have recaptured the first fine frenzy of their meeting, when she was all to him and he was all to her.

Now he knew their relationship had gone on the rocks, because the sentiment was no longer there.

It was not long before Hamsun came to Sally's place to meet men. She so completely trusted Sally that she left her money with her. It was not the money she wanted but the physical need for sensations that gave her a pleasant escape from her dull life with Silok and reconciled her to city life. In time it became a habit, and she faced the truth that she was unfaithful because she preferred European men. It was Sally who taught her to be discreet.

"No one need know," Sally said. "In your position, you want to be careful. I don't want to see you get into trouble. I will see to that. If you keep away from the residents here, and only see tourists and others, you'll be all right."

Hamsun always came home from these visits refreshed in spirit. If she came home late in the afternoon and found

Silok there, she would say she had been taking a stroll and he didn't ask questions. She also felt more friendly toward Silok because she was feeling happier.

They usually had a quiet dinner and listened to music, and then Silok would say he had work to do. She couldn't be less interested in the legal work he was doing. Sometimes he would become amorous, but she would say she was too tired to make love.

CHAPTER 16

ONE DAY Weysen was astounded to hear Silok say, "Hamsun and I have agreed to be separated."

"Why?"

"It just didn't work," Silok replied curtly.

There was no necessity for further explanation.

At this time—it was now 1929—there was a great depression. Banks were closing one after another. Several old business houses had declared bankruptcy. Rubber was cheap as dirt. All credit was threatened.

Silok still had his job and had returned to live with his uncle. Hamsun had gone back to work in a store, then changed to a beauty shop. Later, Silok found that she was working as a manicurist at a hotel barbershop and was earning good money because of her attractive looks.

If Weysen was surprised to hear that his friend had separated from his mistress, the latter was still more surprised

that a friendship had grown up between Aunt Siu-eng and Weysen.

You never can tell about a woman. Siu-eng was at least four or five years Weysen's senior. From the point of view of physical appearance, Silok never thought that his friend was attractive to women—of all people, to his neat, delicate young aunt, who he believed would never marry.

The unruly hair and the generally unkempt, challenging appearance of a poet apparently were just the thing to capture Siu-eng's heart. No doubt, the admiration had been mutual. Even in his most casual reports, Weysen, due to his superior background in Chinese literature, wrote a readable, better-than-average literary style, with here and there a sudden classical allusion which appealed to a well-read Chinese scholar. Usually the more remote and little known the allusion, the greater the delight of a reader who could recognize it. It was like an innuendo, so much more enjoyed because it was understood by only a few people at a party.

All literary allusions have a kind of hidden snob appeal, give a sort of "you-don't-understand-but-I-do" feeling.

Since their coming together, Weysen had also encouraged Siu-eng to publish her poems and short sketches under a literary pseudonym.

But how was the delicate, beautiful, and artistic Siu-eng to stand Weysen's sloppy hair and stained fingers and general state of forgetfulness about carrying matches, and so-called good manners toward ladies? She evidently loved it all.

Sometimes the two were invited to the uncle's home. Since Silok had returned to live there, he often telephoned

to them to come over, if either of them had nothing to do.

The home was once more alive with young people's voices. Siu-eng was lively in their company, and even Wey-sen carried noticeably cleaner handkerchiefs.

Once the uncle said to Wey-sen in Silok's absence, "This is the darnedest thing I ever heard of. That foreign girl has got into his blood. He still wants her and hopes one day she will come back to him. How do you like that? I am not rich, but still I don't like to have a manicurist for a daughter-in-law of the family. The darnedest thing I ever heard of."

He chewed his cigar and spat.

Silok looked very much thinner. His cheekbones began to stick out. He acquired a veiled, dreamy look in his eyes.

On the tenuous basis of a temporary separation, Silok continued to see Hamsun. There was no bitterness on either side. Hamsun was not bitter because she had achieved what she wanted, and Silok still hoped that the separation was a temporary one. They usually greeted each other with a cheerful "Hullo!"

One afternoon, Silok took Hamsun to a café on a corner of the square leading to the park. It was a little away from the center of the city. They had often visited this café because there were comparatively few people there, and they could be alone. The café was open all night, and in their first year together they had come here often. Near it was a cheap *boîte de nuit*, dimly lighted, where the customers could have drinks and dance with hostesses.

Silok persisted in thinking that by taking her to a scene where they used to meet as young lovers he might revive

old memories. The owner, a tall man, and his wife knew them well. Right near the door there was a juke box, and behind the juke box were tables for six or seven couples. Silok selected one of the inside tables, where they could have a quiet talk together. This was their chance to discuss whatever problems lay before them. He inquired how she had been faring and she told him about her work at the Raffles Hotel. Work was light and she frequently got tips of a dollar. She was quite happy about it.

Some French sailors came in at this moment, called for some wine, standing at the counter, selected a record for the juke box, and began to sing. Hamsun got up to listen to the music, and very soon was helping the sailors select the records she liked. She had started quite a conversation with them, and was shaking her head and clapping her hands to the rhythm of the music.

Silok was terribly annoyed that she had neglected him for some unknown sailors. This opportunity to be alone together meant nothing to her. Left alone, he was forced to go to the front and join them. She was looking at the insignias on their uniforms and asking what they meant. Very soon they crossed over to the night bar and had a drink. Hamsun discovered she had lost a silver cigarette lighter which Silok had given her, inscribed with her name. She was frantic. She remembered she had lent it to one of the sailors but the sailor denied it. They crossed over to the café to look for it. Then the sailor produced it, claiming he had found it lying in one of the flowerpots.

If anything hurt Silok more than the night on the beach, it was this meeting. Perhaps she wanted to demonstrate her

freedom by preferring the company of the unknown sailors to his; perhaps she just did not care and wanted to discourage him.

He proposed that they go to the Great World, a popular amusement area where there were shooting galleries, souvenir shops, stalls for drinks, ice cream parlors, movies, and a dance hall. This was the place where many Malay youths went with their girl friends. Girls and boys danced to a drum rhythm and screeching music by facing each other, clapping hands, and stepping forward and backward. But their bodies never touched; it was a way of dancing developed in the tropics, where an embrace would be unthinkable on account of the heat and perspiration.

"But I have been there already," replied Hamsun.

"Then let's have supper somewhere, wherever you like."

"Sorry, I have a dinner engagement with a friend. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," answered Silok, feeling like a beaten dog.

He said in that case he would be going home. She wasn't going yet, as she would be waiting to go out to dinner.

Silok was seized with a fit of terrible loneliness. He had never been treated so cheaply by any girl. Yet he knew he could never cut himself off from her. He was incapable of loving anyone but Hamsun.

He had supper with his uncle's family. His heart was ready to break. He went to his room and tried to read. But he could not concentrate. He wanted to see Hamsun, to see her face and hear her voice. He waited till about ten o'clock and decided to go see her again at her home, for he must speak to her. He told his uncle he was going out. His uncle

saw his restlessness and did not ask questions. If Hamsun had gone to dinner with a friend she must be back by this time.

He went to her mother's house and was told that she was not home yet. That left him more disappointed and lonelier than before.

He went to all the night clubs in the hope of finding her and forcing her to come back with him. But there was no trace of her.

Finally, he went back to their favorite café, thinking she might possibly be there. He found her there with a new friend whom he had never seen before, a young, athletic-looking Frenchman of medium height.

When she saw him come in she was surprised but not embarrassed. She whispered to her friend, indicating that Silok was her former lover. They were introduced. The Frenchman looked at him with sparkling eyes. Evidently he was amused. They smiled at each other. They were playing an African tune called "Sweetheart, I Love You."

The three of them went over to the night bar next door. All this time they were very friendly, Hamsun speaking sometimes to the Frenchman and sometimes to him. They were told that there would be some sort of floor show. They waited until midnight. There were very few customers as yet and the show never started.

Hamsun followed the Frenchman back to the café and stood around doing nothing. Silok felt definitely that he was in the way and said he would go home.

Hearing the news gladly, the Frenchman said, "Can I send you home?" and Hamsun said, "He has a car."

"No, thank you," replied Silok.

They came out and stood on the corner of the square. The Frenchman was getting impatient. He said, "Good night, then," and started to walk away with Hamsun. Silok said good-bye and stood there, watching to see where they were going. Instead of going to the Frenchman's car, the two of them headed for the park, hand in hand. Silok stood watching the girl he loved disappear into the darkness of the night on the arm of another man. The effrontery of it!

Silok felt an icy coldness in his heart. He needed no further doubt or hesitancy. This, finally, was the real Hamsun that he saw. All was over between them he thought.

Suddenly the word "independence" struck him with a bang. Yes, she wanted independence from him, as he himself wanted independence from his uncle.

The craziest thing he did occurred the next morning. He had tossed in bed all night, unable to sleep. He woke up early and his first thought was of Hamsun. He felt he had unfinished business to attend to. He must see Hamsun and make a definite break.

It was about eight o'clock and he expected to join her at breakfast. To his great surprise, as he approached her house, he saw a car pull up and Hamsun came out of it. The same Frenchman was sitting at the wheel, grinning.

She showed no embarrassment. Her face was happy and cheerful.

"Come in. I have just come back."

"No. I happened to be up early and came this way."

"Is there anything you want to say?"

"Nothing."

Meanwhile the Frenchman, who had remained in the car, was smiling triumphantly. He waved a hand, put his engine in first gear, and the car sped away.

Silok turned, walked a little distance, caught a bus, and went to his office.

That morning's encounter had put a finishing touch to Silok's dream of love. Their love did not even have a physical basis; she was absolutely frigid with him although she did not mind consorting with unknown sailors all night.

CHAPTER 17

THE YEAR was 1921. Many things at home and abroad happened to change the course of events in Silok's life.

The Depression had shaken Singapore to its foundations. Only the very biggest survived. Several local banks were closed down and thousands of employees were thrown on the streets. The dockyard area was full of loafers looking for jobs. Beggars multiplied. There were daily stories of suicides, or of some millionaire wiped out overnight. The English institutions of banking, insurance, shipping, and credit, operating on sound principles, were affected but for the most part withstood the strain pretty well. The speculators in rubber and sugar were a different story. It was a form of gambling to which the Chinese were preternaturally inclined. Fortunes were made and unmade in the course of a few months.

There were also a number of people who went *tiokong*, clear out of their minds from sheer despair.

The break with Hamsun and the disillusionment had hit Silok hard. Emotionally he was still tied to her, but he said to himself, "What is the use?" When a man has one leg sawed off, it hurts terribly and there are twitches of pain afterward, but the first month is the hardest. After a while it hurts no longer.

What Silok forgot was that in those upsetting months when he was having trouble with Hamsun he had neglected to send letters home. They had been worried at home, and Juniper and his sister Bekum had written to Silok's uncle to find out what was going on. The uncle, as worried as themselves, had written something about Silok being bewitched by that *hoanpo*. He was "hoping for the best." That made them more worried still. Actually, Silok's mother was becoming bitter at his refusal to come home. She wanted so much for her son to be at her side.

Silok's firm had been very busy, what with the financial mess and the depression that had hit every line of business. Some houses had closed up and the owners had gone elsewhere. Everybody had the right to be paid and nobody was paying. But the old firm of Palmer and Elliston stood unshaken, and in fact had more business than they could handle because of commercial debts and sales of realty and foreclosing of mortgages. Only the banana shops, the cigarette shops, and the pharmacies and groceries and bars went on as usual. People smoked more and drank more. Big business was hit the hardest. Several plantation owners were wiped out. The government issued a moratorium on

debts and liabilities for three months to see how things turned out.

Silok's uncle was among the sharpest men to sense what was coming. He had sold out his plantations in time and realized a considerable sum. He was talking of retiring from business and going back to China to buy a villa in Kulangsu, Amoy, and retire with his wives and family. Nobody wanted rubber; it was not worth the cost of labor to collect it. He had sold out for three times the price he would be able to get now. The villa was of course more difficult to sell, especially at this time.

Weysen sought Silok out and had a talk with him. "Are you not going home with Uncle?"

"No, why should I? I am learning more about the practice of law. In time, I hope, I will be able to set up a practice of my own. Do you think the Depression will last forever?"

"You never think of going home to see your mother? What is holding you here?"

"I don't know. I am just getting the hang of things. It's all English law and I have come to know it fairly well. What use is my knowledge of law, of English law, back home?"

"I know what is holding you. It's Hamsun."

Silok looked up at him and said quietly, somewhat sadly, "I don't know."

He paused and continued, knitting his brow. "Sometimes I wonder. I wonder terribly, about myself, about everybody around me, about this great modern port. I look out the window and see the blackened brick wall of another

house ten feet away and wonder what we are doing. Tens of thousands of people like me, trying to make an honest living and raise a family, right? Making money, right? Hamsun once said to me, It's love and money that keep the world going. Very philosophical, don't you think? I wonder where she picked that up. She's right too. You have to have both. But I stand on the verandah and survey this great port city and see the crowded sidewalks, the discolored walls, the shabby houses in which most of us live, and the seething masses, millions of them, slaving for a living. Why, it looks insane. It does not make sense."

"Why did you and Hamsun separate?"

"Because she wanted to. She had nothing to do all day, and she said she preferred to work on her own. I don't blame her."

"You are still seeing her?"

"We still see each other," he said, with a visible quiver of his lips. "Sometimes I go to where she works or I go to her mother's home. After the separation, we seem more friendly. I suppose it is because she is feeling happier. We made it completely clear that she has complete freedom to do what she likes, and I to do what I like. And I hope of course one day she will come back to me."

The year, too, had seen changes in Silok's home. There were natural disasters and others not as easily ascribed to an act of God, affecting the lives of the persons in the story.

Since the autumn of that year, Bekum had been living with her husband and child in their father's house at Changchow, and Silok's mother was now living with them. There had been several disastrous floods on the West River

and their house, standing on the bank at Soasia, had been badly damaged. Bekum had also lost her mother-in-law, in a flood which had reached the farm town at night. The mother-in-law had been living on the ground floor and was swept away by the flood in the confusion and darkness of the night. They had escaped to Changchow after the flood and stopped at Bekum's father's house, which at the time was occupied by some distant relatives. When the crisis was over, she and her husband decided to live in the city.

One of the important considerations for this move was that she would be able to ask her mother to come and live with her. Juniper had been wonderful to her mother, but Bekum knew that her mother should live with her own daughter. Besides, Changchow was the mother's own home town. It was a great town and had almost everything a person could desire. The local war lord had been driven out by the Kuomintang Nationalist forces and a fair degree of law and order had been restored.

When Bekum and her husband had gone up to bring her mother to Changchow, they found that a tragedy had occurred in Juniper's family.

The Nationalist Revolution had swept north after gaining control of South China. The war lords were defeated, but there were remnant bands who escaped to the mountainous borders between Kwangtung and Fukien, living off the country in a kind of hit-and-run existence. One of the bands fled up the West River and was making for the high mountains in the Fukien coastal area.

Kamchia was buying things at the fair, when a troop of dusty, ragged foot soldiers came up the bank, accompanied by several officers on horseback. As with a routed army in

flight, the morale was terrible. The villagers did not even know whose troops these were. Seeing there was a fair with plenty of food around, the commanding officer told the soldiers to halt on the bank. Some ran off to wash in the river. Others came to the fair and demanded food.

Soon there was pandemonium. The villagers who escaped saw what had happened. After ordering the sellers of noodles, pastries, and snacks to serve them food, some soldiers grabbed chickens and ducks without even offering to pay and ordered the shack restaurants to cook them on the open stoves. Some of the farmers hastily packed up to leave. An officer blew a whistle and shouted, announcing that nobody was to leave the fair grounds with their wares. The frightened farmers made out what he was saying.

"Hah! Don't our troops protect you people in peacetime? Now we are passing through this place on an official mission. Isn't it unfair not to welcome your troops with a show of high spirits? What are you afraid of? We want a meal here and will be on our way. Anyone who dares to leave this place with his wares will be shot. Our commander-in-chief is coming up tomorrow. You won't want him to hear that the people of this town have been hostile, understand? Nobody is to leave."

There was a great hubbub around the place. The farmers were resentful but for the most part were silent. It was their bad luck to run into these troops on this day, that was all.

Soldiers descending upon a village were normally regarded as bringing bad days but one can't have good days the entire year around. Just a few soldiers were detailed

at the approaches to the fair grounds and questioned the visitors at the fair who wanted to return home.

Then a whistle blew and the troops formed a line. They began to help themselves to the sacks of rice and beans, flour, charcoal, and eggs being displayed. An officer directed the men. Some restaurant keepers lost even their cooking utensils, and others anything a retreating army might find useful.

Kamchia was standing by, completely confused at what was happening.

"Here, fellow, what are you doing? Come on. Take this load of rice and carry it. You are a strong fellow. Come with us."

Kamchia couldn't understand what was happening. He lifted a sack of rice of at least a hundred fifty pounds onto his back.

"Get in line! There! Wait and don't move."

Kamchia stood in line, along with the others, completely uncomprehending. He did not mind lending a hand to anybody needing help.

"Forward march!"

The line moved, and Kamchia moved with it. Those who were caught along with him were silent.

"Where are we going?" he asked one of his fellow prisoners.

"Don't know."

They moved up the bank, toward the foothills, clearly in the direction of Amau.

"Where are you going?" he asked an officer who had come up.

"To Amau, if you must know."

Amau was a full day's journey.

"I am not going," said Kamchia.

"What?"

"I cannot come with you, Officer. I am not going."

He put the sack down on the ground.

"Are you crazy?"

"I cannot come. I have work to do at home."

The officer, as a matter of fact, was a physically frail person compared with Kamchia. He poked Kamchia in the chest, and tried to push him. "Come on! Pick that up!" Kamchia stood over him, immovable, feeling the officer's push as if it were a mosquito bite.

The officer took a revolver from his belt. "Will you move or not?"

Kamchia was thoroughly frightened now. He had never seen a gun in all his life. He started to run.

"Come back, you fool!"

But Kamchia kept running.

A series of shots rang out and he fell instantly to the ground. The bullet had gone right through him. He died in a few minutes, without even understanding who had shot him and why.

"That will teach you people a lesson," shouted the officer in a high, thin voice. The straggling line of marchers who had stopped during the interval to see what was happening began to move up the mountains again.

Juniper was frantic when her husband did not come home and when she heard what had happened at the village fair. She ran down to the shopping district on the near side of the river and verified that many farmers had been

forced to carry loads of rice and flour and had been marched away.

Toward dusk, news reached Juniper from Chunsim that her husband was found dead on the outskirts. Chunsim was some two miles away. She hurried there with her brother and mother. She was told that the soldiers had passed that way around three o'clock and some villagers who recognized the body had found it on the slope, just above the rapids.

It was already dark. It was impossible to find anybody to carry the body home. Juniper knelt down by the body, wiping the tears again and again from her face. She did not collapse. A hot rage burned in her chest against these rabble troops.

That night Tienchu stayed with the body and asked his sister and mother to return home. About ten in the morning, the body arrived, carried by the farmers of the village on a door panel. Quite late in the afternoon, some of the prisoners who had been released arrived to tell the details of the story.

The episode was not unusual. It had happened again and again throughout the country. It was just a question of frequency. Some provinces had it more frequently than others, as some provinces have more rainy days in the year. The villagers count on such periodic disasters as a locust pestilence, an outbreak of cholera, and a passing army.

It was with that ultimate simplicity in accepting natural disasters that Juniper summed up the whole incident to Silok sometime later. "The soldiers came to our village that autumn and took him away. He died."

Juniper grieved for her husband as any good wife would

grieve. Then, when she thought of how there was nobody to attend to the farm and do the work that her good husband had been doing, she really got exasperated. When was she going to find such a just husband again?

In December, when Bekum went up to get her mother, to take her to live with her, Juniper had sufficiently recovered from the blow. There was a touch of sadness in her eyes, but otherwise she was too busy with her household to brood over the loss of Kamchia. She had a mother, an aunt, and two children to look after. Tienchu had improved considerably and his appetite had increased since the prolonged treatment. Now they had help at the farm.

When she talked about the soldiers, she said with a calm, quiet, bitter voice, the calm, quiet, bitter voice of the peasants, "Those bloody bastards—*yausiu taymia*. They won't live long! If heaven has eyes, they won't live long!"

That was about the commonest curse permissible on a woman's lips. "Kamchia was a good man, he was."

She knit her brows, but her eyes held a kind of pensive, meditative look. There was much patience in those eyes.

They had a difficult farewell. When Bekum said she wanted her mother to live with her and thanked Juniper and her mother for having done so much, Juniper said, "*Mai-ah*—don't—she likes our place."

"Juniper," said Bekum. "I don't know how to thank you. But while my mother-in-law was living, I couldn't serve my own mother as I wanted to. You have done your share. Now it is my turn."

"Of course, of course." She was almost brusque, showing that she didn't like the idea. "You are her own daughter. of course. But I am like a daughter to her too. I bet you

she will come back. The air there isn't as good as it is here. I know."

Juniper could perhaps be excused for her cocksureness that everybody must come back to the Egret's Nest.

Bekum held her tongue and smiled. She had something else on her mind. However, Juniper accepted the fact that Silok's mother would want to go back to live with her daughter. She might come next year to Changchow to see them, on one of her business trips, selling sugar cane.

Silok's mother was so fond of Bong-ah that she even suggested taking the child with her to Changchow, where there would be good schools.

"Oh, no. You are not going to take Bong-ah with you. That you won't."

"Mama, I want to go away too. Let me go."

"No, my son. Later perhaps. You can't leave your mother now. Later perhaps, all right?"

Bong-ah seemed to have the same restlessness of spirit as his father. Juniper felt a sudden pang in her heart—at the tragedy of the lure of the cities and the restless spirit of men, both young and grown-up, which had cost her so dear once. It was the age-old problem of waiting mothers and patient wives: "Men must work, and women must wait." She could almost see and fear the pattern of Silok's mother's life becoming her own. She bent over and hugged her child more tightly than before.

CHAPTER 18

IN THE SPRING of the following year the uncle was going back to Amoy. He was going to buy a home in Kulangsu and then would come back to bring his family over. He was closing his shop near the waterfront and asked Weysen's father to look after his business in the interval. They could communicate by telegraph about any important decisions.

Juana had given birth, as she had planned, to a baby boy, who was now one year old. She was going back with the uncle, but the aunt preferred not to move until the new house was ready.

The night before the departure the family gave the uncle a send-off dinner at his own home. The dinner was timed to coincide with the anniversary of the baby's arrival.

There was an air of great gaiety. The uncle was retiring from a successful business' career, and had a young son at last. His face had a ruddy complexion. Apart from the

heavy pouches under his eyes, and his graying hair, he still looked vigorous.

He had saved something like one hundred thousand dollars from his rubber estate and he could well afford to retire to his homeland, which all Chinese overseas dream of. The whole family was there in addition to Weysen and his father.

He was feeling in high spirits, if only because of his satisfaction in having foreseen the economic catastrophe and having escaped the worst.

They all talked in the Fukien dialect. He talked of the land he was going to buy, the kind of house he would like to have. Juana was going back to see for herself, but the aunt seemed to offer no opinion of her own. The uncle was reminiscing about his business experiences in Singapore in general and expressing his opinions on how fortunes are made and lost and recovered again.

"Some people have a knack for business, some don't. You just feel. Of course it is all a gamble. Even running a rubber plantation is a gamble. Luck must smile upon you. You can build up a fair fortune through solid business and patience over the years, as I have done. But you don't become barefoot millionaires."

By "barefoot millionaires" he meant Lakjio Lee and his friends. He had a hidden contempt, as regular businessmen do, for those who struck it rich by illegitimate means. Part of it was jealousy, perhaps, but part of it was due to the fact that the Chinese community as a rule did not think much of those who got rich by smuggling, cheating the law, and underworld gangster methods.

The uncle left the next morning by steamer for Amoy.

Silok sent word to his mother and sister and told his uncle to explain why he could not leave now.

"Give Bekum all the news about me. Tell her that I've got a raise in salary and not to worry about me."

"I will," replied his uncle. He focused a sharp but not unkindly eye on his young nephew. "And don't do anything foolish while I am away."

The uncle had told his family that he would be back when the house was ready. It might be any time from three months to a year, depending on whether he could buy a house or would have to have one built.

Silok had a steady job, was living in his uncle's house, and drove his uncle's car to the office every day. He had not seen Hamsun for some time. He could not help thinking of her, but he forced himself to keep away. Hamsun had made it clear beyond a doubt that she no longer loved him or even cared for him, and he did not want to suffer the same humiliations again. In time, he recovered and felt no more pain, no more longing, but only a strange kind of peace and tranquillity.

He avoided even the night clubs, for fear of encountering her again. Once or twice, as his car sped toward the west of the city, he thought he saw her figure at the waterfront. He quickly turned his eyes. He did not want to know. He did not know whether she had seen him; possibly she had, for she could recognize the car and the license number. At such moments he felt broken and terribly lonely.

One day Hamsun's mother appeared at his house to tell him that Hamsun was sick and was asking for him.

His first reaction was one of coldness and resentment at

the disturbance to his peace of mind, a peace which had cost him a tremendous effort to achieve. Was this a trick to lure him back?

He stopped to think a moment. The cold exterior which he had assumed to wrap up his misery went through a general thaw. The flimsy walls of that fortress for self-defense began to shake and crumble.

He put on his white jacket and sun helmet and went with the mother. It was not a trick. Hamsun lay in bed, very much emaciated.

He went near her. She had seen him come in and her eyes opened in a weak, tired smile. He took her hand and gently pressed it, and then bent over to kiss her.

"My Hamsun, I am so happy to see you."

"I am so happy to see you, too."

Hamsun knew then that he still loved her.

"I am sorry for what happened," she said.

"You needn't be sorry. It wasn't you. We were living through hard times. It got on your nerves."

Silok told her about his uncle's return to Amoy and about his raise of salary and how he was living now.

"I saw your car speeding by several times. You didn't see me, or you didn't want to see me."

"No, I never saw you at all. I would have stopped," he lied, to make it easier.

"I know my mistakes now." Her voice was unusually soft in her illness. "I wanted to be independent."

"I know I didn't give you much of a life. Shall we make up? Will you see me again?"

The mother had left the room. Hamsun raised her head from the pillow and pulled him to her and gave him a

warm kiss. He felt the hot tears on her cheeks.

He sat back and felt tremendously happy to find Hamsun by his side again.

"I have had an operation," she told him.

"An operation? What operation?"

"An operation. I didn't want to have a child, as I would have had to give up my job."

"How old was it?"

"Two or three months."

Silok was silent. But Hamsun was unusually frank. She said, "Silok, I can never be your wife. I shall never have another child." Then she covered her face and sobbed. "No matter what happens, a girl gets the worst end of it."

"Don't think of it." Frankly, he did not want to hear more about it. But Hamsun did not try to hide anything.

"I can never be your wife. That is why I am telling you everything. Yes, I have seen men."

"Was it the Frenchman?"

"How do I know? Everything a girl does she is punished for. But the men aren't. Sally tells me the men she knows are all married. Sally said it was all my fault, that I was not careful."

"Who is Sally?"

"A girl whom I know."

At this moment she stopped for a long while, the whites of her eyes staring up at the ceiling.

Silok's brow was furrowed in thought. He loved Hamsun intensely. Instead of being angry he thought of her at that moment as a suffering woman, revealing the heritage of her sex. Somebody had to invent Eve even if she did not exist.

The next moment Hamsun was smiling. "Don't feel sorry for me. I'll be all right."

"I am awfully sorry for you. I just love you."

Hamsun extended a hand and said, "You are a queer chap. I have never met a fellow quite like you. I like you more than ever before. Don't worry about me. I'll be all right."

A lump rose in his throat because the girl was so honest and frank and so brave about it.

"You must have had a horrible experience."

"I did. What of it?"

"Will you now come and live with me?"

Hamsun turned to him and said, seriousness in her voice, "I loved you once madly, blindly. I thought we could make a go of it. We couldn't. I like you very much, more than I like anybody else. But I don't think I can be a good wife to you. I am convinced. I shall never try again."

"Then why did you send for me?"

"Because I wanted you to know everything and not expect too much of me. I'll be up and about in a short time and I want to work for my living. I can take it."

This was a line he had never expected. There was a clean wholesomeness about it.

"But I want you. I need you."

There was great wisdom in her head when she said, "No, if I were married to you I'd make you miserable and be miserable myself. We can still see each other. We can be friends."

"You mean you don't love me any more."

"Don't put it that way. I am what I am. I am made that way. And I know you won't like it. I tried very hard to

make a go of it but I found out that I couldn't. You must know that. I don't think I am cut out that way and I suffered for it. There you have the absolute low-down on me. I like work and I like my independence. I hope you do understand."

"I do."

"You don't think badly of me?"

"Not at all."

Hamsun's attitude amazed Silok. It was some weeks later when he brought himself to tell Weysen this and explain why he was seeing Hamsun again.

"I know you cannot pull yourself out of this. And she will not come back to you?"

"No."

"It is amazing," his friend said. "Most girls would have given up work to find the security you can offer her now. Living in a villa and all that."

"I tell you what, you have wrong ideas about her. I think she is absolutely honest. She is naturally noble, incapable of deceiving me."

"You are crazy."

"No, I am serious. She is great. I used to love her body, now I see something in her soul. I love the way she holds out for her independence, and I am continuing to see her as a friend, not as a lover. I mean that. No matter what you say. There is a great human quality in that girl of mine. She has proved it."

All of this made no sense to Weysen or to Aunt Siu-eng.

Silok's mother had now returned to live in the family house on the East Gate Street. It was a comfortable, large-sized house. In the front was a shop, where Bekum's husband sold cotton and silk fabrics imported from Amoy. Behind it was the court paved with slabs of "green stone" of a very fine quality, peppered with gray. A well stood on one side where the kitchen was. Behind it were the living quarters, on a slightly higher level, reached by two or three steps, as was traditional architecturally. The center was an open hall, while the rooms at the sides and back were used as sleeping quarters.

Silok's mother was glad to be home with her own daughter. She was enjoying the privileges of a grandmother. In the daytime she took a light bamboo stool and sat in the shop, watching the passers-by on the street. The East Gate Street was one of the busy thoroughfares of Changchow. They had everything within walking distance. Silok's mother had her pocket full of dimes. There was an endless variety of delicacies and cookies, such as *hoklengko*, and snacks and puddings of various kinds, gorgeous peaches in spring, salted pears in summer, "digestive olives" in autumn, and sweet tangerines in winter. It was her custom to buy these things and give them to the family, as grandmothers who had money would. Always modest and easily contented, she was now enjoying the dignity and respect and comfort due to old age.

The uncle's return had been heralded for months. Upon arrival at Amoy he had made it known that he was looking for a foreign-style house in Kulangsu and was coming back for good. He knew his brother's wife, Silok's mother, was

now living in Changchow and made a point of going to see her. He came as a *hoankheh*, one who had made good abroad and had returned armed with tens of thousands of dollars.

It was a great day when the uncle arrived. He looked like a *hoankheh*, wearing a gold ring and a huge ruby ring on his fingers and carrying a cane that had a horn handle and was rimmed with gold, and he munched, rather than smoked, cigars. He was jovial, satisfied with himself, and talked in a louder voice than usual, knowing that every word he uttered was being listened to.

There was much confusion around the house. The place was crowded, but of course the family would never think of allowing the uncle and Juana to put up at a hotel. This was the house that had been bought and recently repainted and repaired with the uncle's money. Juniper, who had now escaped from the Egret's Nest and had come with her child to live with them, had vacated her rooms in the upper story of the east wing and moved down to share a room with Silok's mother.

Naturally the family, who had never seen Juana, were as anxious to see her and her baby as she was to meet Silok's whole family, and Juniper in particular.

"Ah! This is Juniper," said the uncle to Juana with a tone of great affection. They were in the central open hall above the courtyard, and had hardly got over the first flush of their arrival.

The two young women greeted each other with smiles, the eyes of each swift as lightning, photographing a sharp impression in the flash of a second.

Juniper was wearing a simple white cotton gown with

three-quarter sleeves, her hair done in a bun at the back as she always had worn it. She had dolled up for the occasion, and had put a little white cotton knot across the bun as the symbol of mourning.

"I have heard Silok say so much about you."

"How is he?"

"I'll let your Jitiu tell you later."

A shadow quickly passed over Juniper's face, and she smiled again. She had heard from Bekum in a general way how Silok had been living with a foreign woman, had been unhappy, and had returned to live with the uncle.

On her hand Juniper still wore the jade bracelet which Silok had given her on his last visit. Compared with Juana's gold rings and diamond and ruby bracelet, Juniper was very simply dressed. Yet of the two, Juniper had the greater ease of bearing.

"Oh, and this is Bong-ah, I am sure." Juana pronounced the name with a curious Shanghai accent.

Juniper pushed the child forward and the child immediately offered his hand to the strange woman whom he had been staring at.

"Meet Akim," said Juniper, using one of the forms for addressing a maternal aunt-in-law. Where there were a wife and a concubine in a family, some simple form of variation, arbitrarily chosen, was always used to distinguish one from the other.

"Tell me, why did Uncle Silok not come back with you?" asked the child.

"Oh, he has business. He can't leave his work."

"Then I want to go and see him. I want to go to Singapore."

Juana's quick eyes caught Juniper's slight involuntary gasp.

The whole family was there, some sitting and some standing in the parlor—Bekum and her husband Si-un, Silok's mother, and the rest of them.

The uncle said, "I had hoped to see you again this time, Juniper. I am glad you've come down."

"I did not come down. I escaped. The child and I have been living here for over a month already."

"Escaped?"

"Yes, escaped. But I'll be going back when the situation changes. I am sure it will. I'll go back."

"I hope you never will," said Bekum.

"Oh, Bekum. How can you say that?"

Bekum smiled mysteriously and said. "I know."

"That is a funny thing to say. Those blackguards won't be there forever. My mother and Tienchu and the baby are still there. Of course, I want to go back."

"Now tell me about my son," said Silok's mother to the uncle. She, as usual, was seated in the best chair facing south.

"What can I say? Your son is all right. He's come back to us since he separated from that *hoanpo*. My dear sister-in-law, I don't know how to say this. I don't understand this son of yours. I treated him like my own son . . . Very willful, must have everything his own way. People might say that I had driven him away from my home when he went and lived with that foreign *tsabaw* in a tiny flat. I lost a lot of face. But he wanted it that way. I'm glad he has found out now."

"Is he in good health?" the mother asked.

"Don't worry. We Tans are as strong as bulls."

"We hear so much about bad business conditions," said Bekum. "About bankruptcies right and left, suicides, *tiokong*. It got us terribly worried."

"He is all right. He's still working with the English law firm."

Juniper's nerves were on edge. When she heard this, she relaxed visibly.

"I never understood why my Silok had to go abroad to make a living," said the mother in her weak, slow voice.

"It is a question of what he wants to do. He hasn't got a business head. He will be living on a salary all his life, just to make a living. He won't be able to return one day with lots of money in the bank, if that is what you mean. It takes a business head to make money, the way his uncle does." He was justifiably proud of himself.

"Why not ask him to come home?" the mother said. "One can make a living anywhere. Doesn't have to be in foreign countries. Now that you have come back, he will be alone. There will only be his Sarkor there after Jichim comes to join you. Why doesn't he come home?"

"Why not indeed? I have come home. Why can't he? That is what I say. If one has a good business head, one can make money anywhere. If one hasn't, one will always be an employee. I can make a lot of money right here, in Changchow or Amoy. That boy is a fool. He's still stuck on that foreign dame."

"Is he?" asked Bekum with a worried look.

After they had rested and the uncle had taken a short nap in the upper story directly above the well in the courtyard, he came down and found Juana chatting with the

family in the parlor. Juana was listening to Juniper's story of her flight from the Egret's Nest.

Several months ago—only a few months after Kamchia's death—a company of the rabble army had come back to eat off the land. Tangaw, as the place was called, was a rich valley, producing rice, sugar, hemp, and some tobacco. There was an officer who called himself a colonel—a rank which he presumably had conferred upon himself—and probably a hundred fifty troops with some fifty rifles between them, enough to establish authority over the people. The colonel claimed that this was part of a great army, whose troops occupied the coastal border between Fukien and Kwangtung, where high mountains come down to the sea and there are many bays and inlets.

They had made their headquarters in an old temple, as there was no visible public building anywhere. There had never been a police force in the thirteen villages that occupied the valley, and there had been no need of one. Only a sheriff existed, to run official errands and make reports in case of any deaths or violence. The army had come to "keep the peace" where peace had always been kept by the population themselves, and succeeded only in harassing the people with taxes on crops and traffic, and making life a hell for them.

True, the Nationalist Government existed in Nanking, but Nanking was so far away and the Nationalists were busy with their northern march, and this was a subcontinent in the far south and out of the way.

That was the previous winter. When spring came around, the colonel was looking for better quarters for himself and his immediate staff. The Egret's Nest was his

choice. From every point of view, it was most desirable. It stood on a spur, commanding a good view of the entire valley. It was not too far from the one-street town below, being only one and a half miles away.¹ It had a shady wood and plenty of cool space, and a swift, sparkling stream in the ravine only a hundred feet down, good for swimming in summer. There was no telephone, but he had a twenty-foot pole rigged up, from which he could send signals to the troops below.

The colonel brought a secretary and an A.D.C. with him, and occupied the sitting room, the main bedroom, and the dining room in the wing of the house. Juniper, her brother Tienchu, and her mother, Mrs. Loa, and the two children were crowded into the southwest end, where Silok's mother used to sleep.

However brave Juniper had been at first, she was now terrified.

"Oh, Mother, I'm afraid. He's trying to be friendly, too friendly. I don't like his thieving eyes."

"Steady, Juniper, steady!" said Mrs. Loa. "He won't dare. I am here."

Another day, she came to her mother, and said, "It's getting impossible. I must get out of here. His aide-de-camp has spoken to me. He is his pimp. He has made it quite plain. Always 'or else.' If it comes to that, I'll kill him and kill myself. But I don't want to do that. I have Bong-ah to think of."

"What did you say to him?"

"I said, your rabble troops have killed my husband. *Yausiu Taymia!* Leave me alone!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I will get away. I must get away before it goes any further. Tonight, toward sunset, I will go down with Bong-ah, as if I were going to shop. He won't know."

"There won't be any boat leaving, and boats will be searched."

"I know my way. I will bring only a small black bag, not to attract attention. I will head for Siokay, where I can take a boat to Changchow, and live with First Auntie."

"And when the officer asks?"

"Say anything when I am gone. Say I have gone to live with a relative."

That night, after eating a full meal, and taking with her some stuffed buns and two suits of clothing packed in a bag and fifty dollars in her inside jacket pocket, she went down with the child, slowly and openly through the front gate. Reaching the main street, she cut across the bridge and reached the other side.

She had made the foot journey of about ten miles to Siokay several times before, once with Silok. With the boy walking by her side, she followed the river until it turned abruptly east, then began the ascent on the hill path.

It was pitch-dark and a slight drizzle began to fall. Juniper took the boy firmly by the hand and trudged on, knowing that this boy was her life and her charge, and that she must not let anything happen to him.

It was hard going. The hill paths were getting slippery, and every so often there would be flights of uneven stone steps going up and down.

She didn't know how far they had gone, as the surrounding darkness blotted out all vision. Once in a while, she

glimpsed tiny distant lights shining from cottages far, far away.

At last, she reached the crossing, where the road went from the right to the left side of a stream, and where Silok and she had once stopped and played ducks and drakes on the water.

She remembered the worst part was yet to come, with sharper descents. They might trip and fall in the dark.

She was all tired out. Her arms began to ache from dragging the boy along in the dark. She would not risk it. The drizzle fell steadily but luckily did not get worse. She had forgotten to bring a match with her, but it would not help much.

She crossed over the stepping stones slowly, stone by stone, with the child's hand firmly gripped in hers. The boy seemed excited rather than frightened at this strange night journey.

At last, she sought out a piece of flat ground, strewn with pebbles, on the lower bank of the stream, where a few trees overhead offered some slight shelter from the drizzle. If it got much worse, she wouldn't know what to do, except to sit it out.

She made herself as comfortable as possible, finding a place to stretch her legs while sitting on a small boulder, and asked the child to rest his head on her knees.

The tree overhead offered some shelter, but the drizzle came through the leaves in the form of droplets, wetting her jacket. She took her arm out of one sleeve and covered Bong-ah carefully, and let the raindrops drop on her head and her back while she hunched up, elbows on her knees,

looking in the far distance below the river, where the valley appeared as a comparatively lighter patch. The flowing rapids gurgled in her ears and the memory of the child's father sang in her head.

She must have fallen asleep—she didn't know for how long. She only remembered that she had prayed to heaven, not for her own safety but for safety of the child and for Silok's return.

She woke up with a start when she felt that her whole dress was drenched through. The rain had stopped. Her child was still fast asleep. Gently she got up. Her right thigh had been benumbed by the child's weight. Slowly, she rubbed it until the circulation returned.

Then she got up and laid the child down again on the beach. Luckily his upper body was dry.

She stretched herself and walked about. Then she sat down somewhere on a rock and waited for the dawn.

The sight of the open sky was familiar to her. Light crept in slowly, making the distant outlines of the hills visible, hazy and blurred at first but growing sharper and sharper as the night shed its dark coverlet, sheet by sheet almost.

It grew perceptibly lighter now. She felt ravenously hungry, went to get two buns from her black bag, and ate them. Then she went to the brink of the stream to have a drink of water.

Now refreshed, she tapped on the gentle sleeping child and made him wake up. "We must go, Bong-ah," she said. The child rubbed his eyes. She gave him a bun, and said, "Eat this on the way. We must start at once."

It was about eight o'clock when the mother and child

reached Siokay, hired a place on a big boat that was leaving in the afternoon and waited for it to start.

A force was drawing Juniper closer and closer to Silok, a force unknown to human beings. Juana had happened to bring a picture post card of the steamer by which they had come from Singapore to Amoy.

"A boat as big as a house?" Bong-ah had asked.

"Bigger than ten of these houses," Juana had replied.

From then on the child kept asking questions about the bigger-than-a-house boat, built of steel, that could float on water and was driven by steam power. It was an unbelievable fairy tale. Bong-ah wanted to see such boats in Amoy.

The uncle had temporarily rented a villa in Kulangsu, the international settlement on a beautiful island opposite Amoy. By the same kind of primeval instinct which guided buffaloes in Africa to trudge hundreds of miles for salt, Juniper gladly consented, partly for the child's sake, when she and Bekum were invited to spend some time in the uncle's house on Kulangsu. Kulangsu was only thirty miles away, Singapore fifteen hundred miles.

CHAPTER 19

IT IS CURIOUS how the atmosphere of a house changes with the persons inhabiting it.

Already, the uncle was sending for some of the furniture—desks, the marble-topped table, and teak chairs—familiar things that he would like to have even in his temporary rented house. The Singapore house seemed emptier and at the same time bigger, and took on the character of something temporary, something in transit, destined for change.

No longer could one hear the big booming voice of the uncle. No longer was there the moving about in golden slippers and the low but young and feminine voice of a young woman.

The aunt, too, was seen much more on the ground floor and the terrace. She complained less of her pains, and needed both opium and Buddhism less.

As it was summer, Siu-erig was easily persuaded to leave her room in the school and come and live in the house.

The three of them—Silok, Siu-eng, and the aunt—were good company for each other. Weysen became a frequent visitor.

As Weysen's face became rounder and looked better washed and better shaved than it used to be, Silok also became progressively thinner and more careless of his appearance. For the first time, Aunt Siu-eng saw that his shoulders were a little stooped.

It was the aunt who seemed to be looking after the young nephew now. The Morris car was still there, to be sold later, as there was no use for cars on the island of Kulangsu. Often it was the aunt who persuaded Silok to go out for a drive by offering to accompany him herself.

This was about the time that the firm of Palmer and Elliston was reviewing its contracts for its staff. It was the decision of the directors that although there was enough business to handle during the general liquidation of business and litigations for debt, the company should cut down its staff. It was an unhealthy kind of economic situation to look forward to in the Depression that was paralyzing money, credit, and commerce in every field.

Silok learned with surprise from a letter from his firm that his services would not be needed in the year commencing July, and that, in view of his satisfactory record, the firm was sending him a three-month bonus.

This was the young man's first big blow since his graduation. Work was of course impossible to find in those years.

He looked more morose than ever. Frequently he would take the car after supper and go off by himself, looking like a lost soul. He drank a little more, not less. Sometimes he would go off without supper, to the distress of his

two aunts. He would come home late. They would be waiting for him. He would go to the kitchen, make himself a cup of broth with bouillon cubes, and go to bed. Another time, he came home and told the aunt that he had had a bite of sandwich and beer and that was all he needed for supper.

It pained Siu-eng very much to see him so unhinged, unlike his usual reticent but confident self. His cheekbones began to show and he seemed to have aged several years.

"You are looking awful," said Siu-eng to him one day. "You mustn't go on like this. The Depression hits everybody, not only you. It isn't that we haven't money. We can buy anything we need."

"I know."

"And I am sure you can get a teaching position in a school. I can help you find out."

Silok looked up at Siu-eng, who had always understood him so well, even when he went to live with Hamsun.

"What about Hamsun? Don't you see her any more?"

"I still do. We are friends, as I told you. But lately I have been asking her out and she has been saying that she has other appointments. 'Silok,' she told me, 'why don't you go out with other girls?' The people at the barbershop know that I am her friend, but I can't go and have myself manicured every day. Sometimes I hang around at seven to catch her coming out. What can you make of her? Sometimes I go to her mother's house at night and she isn't there."

Any man would have long ago taken the hint and left such a woman for good, but Silok still never lost hope. He just wanted her and needed her.

One day, Silok came home after a night's search in the city, and announced to Siu-eng and Weysen that Hamsun had completely disappeared. He had not seen her for about ten days, and asked her mother, and the mother had simply said that she had gone away from home—where, she wouldn't say, or was unable to say.

"The man seems broken," whispered Weysen to Siu-eng, when Silok had gone upstairs. "We must do something about it. He can't take it. Any man would laugh over the episode with such a fickle girl like Hamsun and forget about it. I don't like the look in his eyes."

Like some people who have received a mental shock, Silok's disgust with himself took the form of depressive silence. He stayed in bed and slept and slept, as if he never wanted to wake up.

Aunt Siu-eng was now really alarmed. Could that be *tiokong*?

Siu-eng did not want to write home and scare Silok's mother. She could not either write or telegraph. It would only scare them.

She had one clear, definite idea that there was only one person in this whole world who could save him, could restore his joy and faith in life, and that was Juniper.

Without Silok's knowledge, Aunt Siu-eng took the next boat to Amoy. The aunt also provided a thousand dollars from her own savings and she told Silok that Aunt Siu-eng would be gone for a short while and would soon be back.

When Siu-eng told the uncle and Bekum at Kulangsu of what had happened to Silok, everybody was distressed.

"I had to come personally," she said. "I dared not write. I don't think we should tell his mother yet. Weysen and Auntie talked about it and we thought I should come and consult you."

"That was why he hasn't written at all," said Bekum. "How are you going to tell this to Juniper? She is here."

"I didn't know that she had come to Kulangsu, or even to Changchow. That makes it simpler. I am certain all he needs is to see Juniper. Where is she?"

Juniper had taken the boy to the Kang-A-Au beach, as she did every afternoon, and sat there and watched him play in the beautiful, clean white sand.

When Juniper came home with the child, just about suppertime, she walked very straight. She did not know that Aunt Siu-eng had come from Singapore.

She was overjoyed to see this aunt whom she knew and remembered well.

"What brings you here? How marvelous!"

"Vacation. Just for a visit. I'll be going back soon. And you! You look so modern," Siu-eng stared at her in unfeigned admiration.

"How is Silok? Tell me all about him."

"He is all right. I have gone to live in Uncle's house, and we see each other every day."

"How are things in Singapore?"

"In general very bad. I will have a nice talk with you after supper."

After supper, Juniper invited her to her room. "We want a good talk. I haven't seen you for about three years."

Siu-eng gradually led up to the topic. As she spoke about Silok's unhappiness, his loss of a job, his wandering about the city at night, how he missed his meals, Juniper listened, still as a statue.

"Tell me, why doesn't he write me, or his mother?"

"He can't. I can't quite explain. Even I could not write. That was why I had to come personally."

Suddenly, a great alarm came into Juniper's eyes. "What has happened?" she asked. "You must tell me. What has happened? What is it you could not explain?"

Siu-eng found herself crying, and that scared Juniper still more.

"Is he dead?"

"No."

"Sick?"

"No."

"Why can't you tell me?"

"It's something which has happened inside him. He is physically all right."

"*Tiokong?*" Juniper put as much force into that word as it could bear.

"No. He is all right. But he is so unhappy, wandering, wandering all night. He is a broken man. So lonely! . . . He needs you, Juniper. I know. Only you and nobody else can make him happy again . . ."

Juniper was first shaken, then her face flushed, and she felt her throat tightening, and finally she broke down and literally melted into tears. She moaned, "Oh, my Silok, why didn't you let me know?"

Bekum stood at the door, seeing Juniper crumpled up into a ball of tears. She had been waiting to come in and

share in the talk. Now she walked in. She touched Juniper on the shoulder and helped her to sit up.

Juniper sat up, and blew into a handkerchief.

"That is what I came home to tell you. Will you go?" asked Siu-eng.

"Will I go? You can't stop me. He needs me."

"You must go," said Bekum. "My brother loves only you. That I know."

Juana now came in.

"What? Is this a conspiracy?" said Juniper, smiling through her tears.

"Juniper," Juana said. "I know him better even. He spoke of things that I at first could not understand."

"What things?"

"Only he could explain it. He never belonged in Singapore. He had that photograph of you two at the Egret's Nest, which he had on the wall. He talked to me about his mountains and your mountains, like an inspired man. He was never truly happy in Singapore. 'Once a mountain boy, always a mountain boy,' he said to me several times."

"Yes," said Siu-eng. "I saw him crying on his bed when he received your first letter. He cried and laughed, holding your letter in his hand, and couldn't read it because he laughed so much. Then he sat up and we read it together."

"When can I go?"

"I will arrange it. You must take Bong-ah with you. Don't worry."

"Does he know?"

"No."

Bekum stood there, looking and thinking and wondering, and being grateful that everything had turned out so

well. She had a picture of Silok as a brother whom she loved, almost lost, and now had found again. How she would love to tell her mother the great news!

Silok had got over his fit of depression. He told himself that he must pull himself together, no matter what happened. He had not seen Hamsun for a stretch of three or four weeks. She seemed to have completely disappeared. The barbershop told him that she had simply failed to show up, hadn't asked for leave or anything.

"Oh, well!" he said to himself. "That's that!"

Then one day Silok met Hamsun walking with a sea captain and her friend Sally. Hamsun was very glad to see him and introduced him to the captain.

"He is Captain Alvares. His name is the same as mine. Isn't it interesting?" she said.

"Where have you been?"

"To Borneo."

The captain was a short, muscular man with a heavy, thickish mustache. They were going into an ice cream parlor and asked Silok to join them. Pointing to him, she said to the captain, "He is a lawyer, a very, very dear friend of mine." The captain had a jovial appearance and was completely at ease. Hamsun looked just the same as always.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going away?" Silok asked.

"I had no time. He said he wanted to take me on a trip. His boat was sailing the next day, and you didn't come to see me."

"Did you quit your job?"

"I did. I couldn't forgo the pleasure of such a trip. I stayed on the ship and we went on to Bali and came back only yesterday. I really meant to call you up and let you know."

It was evident that Hamsun had gone off with another man. Silok said he wanted to take them all out for supper that evening, but Hamsun said that she couldn't go, that she had promised to take the captain to see her mother and then they were going out to dinner.

It rather surprised him that the captain wanted to see Hamsun's mother. Hamsun told him that she would come back to see him as soon as dinner was over. Silok gave her the name of a hotel at the corner of River Valley Road and Clemenceau Avenue, where they had met before.

He waited till midnight. How he waited! After all, they had not seen each other for such a long time. The clock ticked away. One o'clock . . . Two o'clock . . .

Silok became really exasperated. He went out and lay on the grass, and arranged a place for himself leaning against a tree, where he would be able to see her coming up the steps to the entrance. At the sound of every car he turned to look, hoping that the car would stop and she would get out. He would be ready to rush up and welcome her. He was sure the captain would send her home.

It was long past two and the night was silent. He could hear a car coming half a mile away. The cars came every ten or fifteen minutes now, lighting up the corner with their headlights, then went on.

"She surely will come," he told himself. "She has never failed in her promise."

If the captain had taken her to a theater, they should

have been out long before. Even if they had gone back home and stopped for a drink, it was unlikely that they would be so late. The later it got, the more imminent seemed her arrival.

By three o'clock he went into his room. Was this a deliberate insult to tell him unmistakably that she did not care for him? His mind was made up. She would never come. He went back and lay in bed without undressing, but kept the light on. He could not sleep.

At four o'clock he heard her footsteps in the corridor, looking for his room number. He heard a knock and opened the door. He glanced at her and she was silent. He was silent too.

"You are mad at me," she said.

"You ~~bet~~ I am. We have not seen each other for so long. You don't care, do you?"

Hamsun had never seen his face so furious.

"You hate me, I know."

Silok did not answer, and started to undress.

She took off her wrap, threw herself onto a chair, and said briefly:

"The captain, I believe, is my uncle."

It came out that one day about a month ago Sally had called her up and suggested that she meet a Portuguese captain. His name was the same as Hamsun's. She went and met him. The captain was fascinated by the young girl. "Ah," he said. "We have the same name. I know my brother had a child by a Cantonese woman. He was working for a shipping concern in Hong Kong. Then he died, and I have never found out where his child was. I must be your uncle."

The girl laughed. She liked him, for the captain was calm, dignified, and handsome. She felt an affinity for this captain who looked like a hero who had come out of a mysterious past.

She had told her mother that she was going on a trip, invited by a friend, but did not tell her who it was. Hamsun was deeply in love with the captain then.

That night she had taken the captain to meet her mother. It looked more and more probable. Hamsun's mother said that the father's name was José, and the captain said that that was his brother's name. They agreed also on the year in which he had left Hong Kong and returned to Portugal.

"He made me feel so good during the entire voyage," said Hamsun. "His freighter is leaving tomorrow afternoon. He took me back to the ship after dinner. That was why I was so late. His ship is going to Bombay, and he wants me to go with him."

"Are you going?"

"Yes. That is what I came to tell you. When I went back to my cabin I felt as if I were returning home."

"Have you already promised?"

"Yes."

"That means we must separate again."

"I suppose so."

The next morning they were able to spend together, for the captain was busy with his duties. They were rushing all morning to get her visa for India. Then she washed her hair at his place, and she unexpectedly gave him a fugitive kiss. The plain fact was that she was all excited about going away with the captain on another trip.

Silok might never see her again. By this time he had

seen her go off with so many men that he was no longer surprised. He took her to a roof restaurant famous for French food, commanding a superb view of the sea, but her heart was clearly not in it.

"Don't forget I am a Portuguese myself," she said to him. "I like everything about him. When I saw him at work I was proud of him. Always there is the possibility that he is my real uncle. I like him very much and he gives me a sense of family. He calls me his little child."

They went together after lunch to the ship, *S.S. Medusa*.

"I feel it is my own home," she said as they came within sight of the black boat. They went up and met the captain, who was polite and cordial.

"Ah, have you got your visa fixed?" he asked, calling her Juanita, and beaming a full smile at her over the papers on his desk.

As the captain was busy, she took Silok to her own cabin, which was a staff room, close to the captain's, separated only by one room, which was occupied by the ship's doctor. It was a tiny cabin with a single bed and washstand. The captain's cabin connected with the bridge. This was a freighter, taking no more than twenty to twenty-five passengers.

The ship was getting ready to sail at four o'clock. When the time came, all visitors left. Silok stood on the wharf, looking for her farewell wave. But there was no sign of her. For some twenty minutes he stood desolate on the wharf. She really did not care, or she was with the captain.

Later she appeared at the railing on a lower deck with another officer. He waved frantically. She was calmly talking with the officer and did not even look his way. They

could not have been more than thirty feet apart. She disappeared with the officer and did not even turn around to look.

Just before the ship weighed anchor, she appeared arm in arm on the bridge with the captain and leaned on the railing. He waved frantically to get her attention. They seemed to be surveying the scene on the wharf and were talking to each other, as if she didn't expect to see him. Then her eye⁴ caught Silok's figure, and she waved her arm downward slowly, toward him, and turned and talked with the captain again. It was as if she were waving a farewell to a casual acquaintance.

That was the last Silok saw of Hamsun.

That had been the night before Aunt Siu-eng had sailed for Amoy.

Hamsun had promised to write him on the way. But she did not write. About two weeks passed, and he got a letter addressed from Bombay.

My dear Silok,

Please listen to me quietly. I have not written you because I have been very busily occupied. Much has happened. It was like a dream. He calls me his child, and gives me the name Juanita. He says it makes him so happy to have found me. On the ship I was known as the captain's niece; they called me Senhorita Alvares. I want to believe I am his niece. I like everything about the ship and the men I see, mostly Europeans. Silok, please understand that I am half Chinese, but my feelings are European. It is in my blood. Was that the reason that I could not be completely happy with you, knowing that half of me belongs to another world?

The captain is very fond of me and I belong to him completely.

He advises me to stay at Bombay because his ship operates chiefly between Bombay and the Persian Gulf. Sometimes they go as far as Cairo, Beirut, and Genoa. He says one day he may take me to the Mediterranean. Usually they operate with Bombay as their base. He has rented an apartment for me here and suggested that my mother should come and live with me.

My dear Silok, I have not been good for you as I know I should. Will you pardon me for everything? I do not think I shall be passing Singapore again for a long time. Please take care of yourself, and please understand that I have not wanted it this way, but there are forces that are stronger than ourselves. I have always respected you and shall always treasure you in my memory.

Ever,
Juanita

CHAPTER 20

THE READING OF THE LETTER had a strangely calming effect on Silok. It gave him the feeling of something being settled finally. In a way he came to understand Hamsun better. She could never be his. He did not quite believe that this sea captain was her real uncle. But he knew that this was the end.

Suddenly he felt liberated, emancipated from a long oppression. Hamsun's going away was definite, final. From that liberation and the acceptance of the inevitable, he achieved a peace of mind.

He felt as if he had been on a long, long erring journey and had just come home.

He felt a sudden impulse to go home. There was nothing to hold him in Singapore now. He went out and sent a telegram to his uncle:

AM COMING HOME WILL START NEXT WEEK
INFORM MY MOTHER LOVE

He came home and told his aunt. The latter was glad to see the change in his expression, but she said, "No, you'd better wait."

"But I have sent the telegram already. Why must I wait?"

The aunt looked at him and gave a smile so spirited and so genuine as he had seldom seen on her face before. She hesitated a second and said, "I have been waiting for a letter or telegram from Siu-eng. She said when she went home that she was going to arrange some business matter. You'd better wait until she arrives. She may have business for you to attend to."

"What business?"

"It must be family business—what else?"

"Anyway, I have already sent it."

The next day he got a direct reply from his uncle.

HOLD DONT COME HOME YET SIU-ENG HAS STARTED
BACK ON THE NINTH S S TAICHOW WITH JUNIPER
AND CHILD LOVE FROM JUANA AND BEKUM

He held the telegram in his trembling hand and went upstairs to see his aunt. She was sitting up in her bed, her legs crossed, her eyes shut, her lips silently moving, and her fingers counting her beads of sandalwood.

He stopped for a moment, afraid to disturb her in her devotion, tiptoed near, and whispered, "Auntiel!"

She opened her eyes and saw him standing in front of her with a trembling hand holding a piece of paper.

"Auntie, Juniper is coming!"

"I know, I know. Buddha be praised!"

"Did you know about this?"

The aunt nodded her head and smiled sweetly. "Yes, I

knew about it. That was why Siu-eng went home. We all knew that all you needed was just Juniper back by your side."

"Oh, Auntiel"

He was so happy that his eyes blurred.

He called up Weysen to let him know. He, too, had known all along of the purpose of Siu-eng's trip home. Only Silok had not known.

It remained only to count the days of their arrival.

The *S.S. Taichow* pulled into the harbor at eight. She had arrived early in the morning hours outside the harbor, and had just come in. Juniper was as excited as the boy. She had got up at five to peek out the porthole, and by the time the ship was coming slowly into the dock, she and Siu-eng had everything ready. She had a light blue dress on, but still kept her old-fashioned hair-do. The boy was running about, but she wanted more than anything else for Silok to see her with the boy by her side.

Bong-ah was their child, whom she had taken care of for him for nine years, and a visible bond tied them together.

Silok was there. She could recognize him by his height. Siu-eng saw that Weysen was there, too, waving frantically, unmistakably identified by his shock of hair and the way he bit on his cigarette. And then, by their side, they saw a small figure in black, the aunt. Siu-eng had not expected the aunt would be able to come.

Slowly the gangplank was laid. They were at last coming down. There was a moment of embarrassment; then the madness, the joy of a cry, the stretching of an arm, the tears, the holding of hands and not letting go.

"Oh, Juniper!"

"Oh, Silok! You are looking so well!"

"And you!"

There was so much to talk about before lunch and during lunch. Bong-ah had already dashed all over the grounds, and had told Silok all about the big boat they had come in.

"Uncle, there was even a swimming pool on the boat."

Juniper bent over him and said, "Call him Papa. He is your papa."

The boy put a finger to his lip and wouldn't say it.

"Come on, say it. He is your real papa."

Then suddenly the child called, "Papa" and Silok kissed him. Tears came into the mother's eyes.

"I have waited long for this day," said Juniper simply.

After lunch, Weyesen and Siu-eng said, "We are going out. We must leave you alone."

Silok looked up and saw the two walking arm in arm toward the terrace. They turned toward the gate, and disappeared.

Library Form No. 5

Books are issued for
14 days only.

Books lost, defaced
or injured in any way
shall have to be re-
placed by the Borrowers.